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WESTERN ACTION

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ROBERT W. LOWNDES, *Editor*

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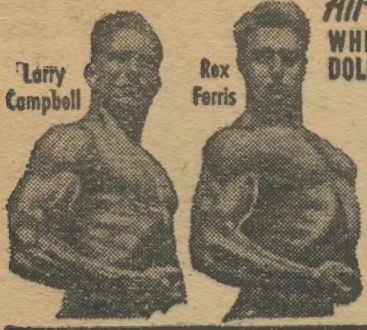

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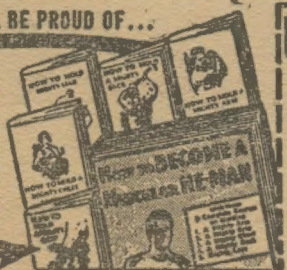

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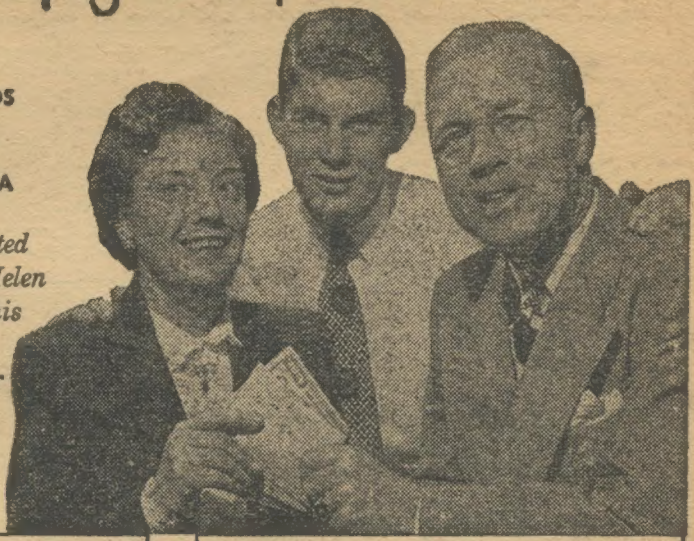

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★ DANGER IS WHERE

JOHN DALTON, riding along the floor of the ditch, heard the shot smash out of the sun-dazzle ahead, slightly off to the left of him. It was a rifle shot; he could tell by the thin flatness of the report. Dalton was not sure that he, himself, wasn't the target. He followed the natural reaction of a man in danger; he immediately spurred his pony over against the closest side of the ditch and scanned it in both directions. But there was nothing to see; the sun was brighter where the arroyo's depth lessened, and it was up there that the shooting had occurred. The sun's sparkle hurt his eyes, but Dalton left his gaze on the opening into the ditch. A mile-long ridge with a four foot shelf between ridge and ditch was something he had been paralleling. Nothing moved. There was not even a wisp of gunsmoke that he could see. Poised, alert, he listened. Then the rifle's sullen challenge came again.

That decided him. Leaving the pony, Dalton ran, bent over. He had progressed about a hundred feet when he saw a man scurrying through the sun's glare, a six-shooter flaming angrily in his fist. He was crouched over close to the buffalo grass and Dalton could not see him very well. But it was apparent that the man was waging a battle for his life. His intentions were obvious; he hoped to get behind the ridge, on that shelf, before the hidden rifle-

YOU FIND IT ★

Jennifer was badly shot up when he lifted that Wells Fargo gold from the Overland Stage.

SMASHING Feature Novel by Rex Whitechurch

man got him. He must have located the dry-gulcher. At least he was bringing his revolver up and pouring screeching lead into a low flat line of buckbrush which grew in a sparse gathering about fifty yards away.

Too damned far for good shootin' with a pistol, Dalton reflected. *I guess it's more bluff than anything else. Maybe he's trying to confuse the dry-gulcher. But—he's not going to do any good with the tool he's got to work with.* Dalton scrambled to his feet and raced back to his pony. He seized his saddle carbine and ran hurriedly, panting, back

One by one, the Mackinsons went down beneath the dry-gulch bullets of an unknown killer, and no one could figure out any reason for the slaughter. But John Dalton, who saw one murder, had an idea of the answer . . .

to his former vantage point. The victim of the trap was still stomping along toward the arroyo and was about twenty feet away, when Dalton saw another pencil of fire dart out of the brush. The slug whined through space, and was followed by another. This one stopped the man who was trying to escape the stalker. He straightened up; he stood motionless, his pistol hand hanging limp, his long fingers uncurling from the butt.

Dalton slammed a shot at the spot where he'd seen the gun fired out of the bushes. He drove a second and a third slug into that line of shadow which the sun dazzle partially obscured. He thought he heard a woman yell back at him, but this was perhaps nothing but his imagination. No woman was doing that fancy shooting, not unless she was a freak shot.

Slugs sang all around Dalton, and taking his time he cut down on the target again. He could see where the brush moved and a patch of scarlet gleamed through the foliage. The lingering echo of his last effort to plug the dry gulcher drifted off across the prairie. There was no answering bullet.

He waited, then called softly to the stumbling figure who was approaching the arroyo. "Drop down and crawl, fella. You haven't got a chance if you don't—"

"No," said the other man, "I think you got him or you frightened him away; scared hell out of him, I'd say." He staggered forward, and Dalton ran out to meet him. He put his arm around the wounded rider's shoulders and supported him to the shelf of the ridge.

Dalton reflected, *I've just stepped into a dry-gulching that puts my neck in a noose. If this man dies I'll be accused of killing him; if he lives, before we can get away from here there'll be a horde of riders down on us, attracted by the firing. I've got no business being messed up in this thing.*

HE HESITATED; turning about, Dalton left his pony again and went back to where the injured man lay bleeding on the shelf of dirt. He stopped beside the man and peered down at him. Middle-sized, about five-eight. John Dalton's cold blue eyes opened themselves widely in the sun; sweat dropped from his bronzed face. He paused over the wounded rider, shaded those hard blue eyes with his bent palm. He saw no movement against the horizon. Blue sky and colorless earth met in a straight line on the rim of the world; he could see at least two miles. There was only a vast hungry emptiness. The riders who had been following him had been temporarily thrown off scent. He figured he had about a four-hour lead. With this decided, he bent down over the prostrate form on the shelf; by now the man's entire blue cotton shirt front was sodden with gore.

I'll probably get myself in a trap, too, if I stay here, Dalton mused. *A Pony Express rider has got no business letting anything delay him.* There was always that need for haste. If anything happened to him the mail would be lost. The disgrace would stay on his name; living or dead he would be considered dishonorable. A P. E. rider's honor was always at stake; wind, snow, sleet, nothing was to interfere with the mail's progress west. It was twenty miles to the next relay station. He knew the route, although he was new this far west of the Missouri.

If I was smart I'd leave here at once. But I can't ride away from this poor devil dyin' out here in the scaldin' sun.

A slow grin tautened the P. E. rider's solemn features. This grin was characteristic of him. The firm pressure of his lean lips was relieved. Good-humor lines deepened around his eyes. The old habitual look of un-caring recklessness stood out in bold prominence.

The man over whom he bent was not dead. A flat blond face was now revealed to Dalton as he turned the other's head gently.

"Take it easy," the P.E. rider cautioned. "How bad you hit?"

A deep strong voice came out of

the man. "I'm not goin' to make it; he got me like he's killed all the rest of th' Mackinsons."

Dalton explored for the wound, cutting away the blood soaked shirt. He traced the bullet's path. The slug had entered low on the victim's left side, at the base of his small ribs. But it had plowed upward; now it was an embedded leaden ball dangerously near the heart. The effort of being moved caused a fresh spurt of blood to shoot out of the bullet hole. Dalton let him back gently and did not move him again. He was stirred to a feeling of profound pity for the helpless one.

The victim was young; a majestic youthful body, lean and powerful, was becoming inert. Hope was simply not in the cards; he was dying and the sweat of death was on his graying face. Life, however, was still bright in his amber-colored eyes.

The seconds passed; the man's breathing grew hollower. "You watch out for yourself," he said. "This is dangerous country for strangers to be in. They don't like them they don't know, fella."

"All right," said Dalton. "I'm used to danger. But we've got to get you loaded on to your nag. I think I can do the job. I'll hoist you up into the saddle; your horse is waitin' for you—"

"He'll wait," was the answer. "Best horse a fellow ever owned. He knows me and I know him. We've been through hell together. Only—it's over now—"

"Don't be too sure," Dalton tried to console him. "As long as you can breathe—"

"It's gettin' harder to do it."

THE PONY EXPRESS rider had seen men die before—often enough, in fact, to have developed that strangely aloof sense of fatalism that always stayed in his subconscious mind. But his admiration for this man was greater than he had usually felt for dying men. The blond youth was going out gamely, without complaining. His amber eyes were filled with the raw courage he needed for the last few conscious moments.

"You know I'm a stranger," Dalton said. "How do you know?"

"Sure. I know everybody in the county. I never saw you before. If you're as bright as you look, you'll get out of here." The speaker's voice was heavily bitter.

"Do you know who ambushed you?"

"Yes, I know." But he did not speak the dry-gulcher's name; his lips came together like thin strips of steel clamped into place.

Dalton felt for his canteen and tipped it to the man's mouth. He did not drink much. Dalton fanned the sweaty face with his hat.

"Where you headin' for?" asked the dying man, growing weaker.

"Marysville, with the Pony Express mail. Is there anything I can do for you?"

His eyes closed and he grimaced with pain. He spoke sharply. "Turn around and go back to Troy and find Helen Mackinson. Tell her Hank's dead. Say it was the ambusher that done it; she'll understand."

"That all?" asked Dalton. "Just the ambusher?"

"He's been killing everybody; she'll know. We're all marked. You take my gun; deliver it only to Helen."

"Seems very little," Dalton mused aloud.

"It's enough," Hank said. "Just give her the message." The voice was getting much fainter now. "Then ride like hell on your way. Don't spend the night in Troy if you do this favor for a Mackinson. You'll die sure, pard."

Dalton's stern sympathy moved him to say something then that he had never said to another dying man: "It ain't so bad after you cross the Jordan. Lots of shade trees and cold water and rest, Hank. There's nothing to it, crossing the Jordan."

"You're all right," Hank muttered. "A Mackinson! Sure. I'm one of them. We're all headed in the same direction. But there ain't been no

back-shootin'. We kill—sure as hell we kill, but we do it lookin' right at our victims and only when they're lookin' at us with a gun, too. There's one man ridin' us all to hell, and ain't no power goin' to stop him till we're all gone. He'll leave Helen for the last—"

"Who is he?" Dalton queried, deeply stirred again.

"Ain't none of us ever seen him yet," Hank said, gasping suddenly for breath. "But I found out one thing today. He—"

But as men had perished before on the verge of uttering names, Hank Mackinson died. John Dalton did not have to look at him again to know the last breath had left his body. Hank's eyelids relaxed and stopped partially opened. The heart in his bony chest was still; the grayness had deepened in his face.

Rising slowly, Dalton replaced the canteen on his shell belt. He tapered up a cigarette. His lean jaws were locked, lumped. There was a grim tautness in his expression.

Twenty-seven years old, he'd had more than his share of such experiences as administering the last rites, as he termed it. He put Hank's hat over the dead face. "They just turned his number up too soon," he grunted. "A good rider rode into the red sun at the end of the trail."

It was near noon now, and Hank's body would be all right if Dalton sheltered it so the buzzards wouldn't get to it before it could be hauled in. He took a long strip of tarpaulin and weighted it down with rocks and covered the tarpaulin with two heavy blankets. He had decided to ride on into Marysville and then backtrack to Troy, after he'd finished his relay. He figured he'd reach Troy by nightfall.

Those long riders will be closing in on me any minute now, Dalton thought. He dug with his bowie knife deep into the earth, covered over the blankets where he had covered the dead man high on the ridge. He was sweating and when he finished his task, he peered around, attracted by a sudden noise. A gray horse stood gazing at him. The mount nickered, came closer. "Missin' his pal," Dalton said. "I'll leave him here with him. Mebbe he'll fight the buzzards off if they come. I've known 'em to do it." He walked down the hill and spoke gently to the gray. The latter came up to him and put his cold nose against Dalton's face. Yes, he'd stay there. He said to the gray, "Your master's dead, boy. Don't leave him. It's goin' to be tough but you're about all he's got left out here with him. Don't go away."

The horse followed him and then when he was in the saddle the gray returned to the ridge and stood peering up at the grave. Dalton suddenly thought of something, dismounted and trudged up the ridge. He had left his knife sticking in the ground. He bent down to recover it and saw something shining in the sunlight. It was a square steel box. He worked desperately to unearth it. Then when he saw the letters written on a white steel plate he uttered an exclamation.

WELLS FARGO

"Damnation," he gasped. "A strong box. Too heavy to lift. How did it come here?" He stood a moment in stern debate with himself and reached his decision. He went to work again, brought dirt from another excavation he'd made and filled in the hole. It took him twenty minutes at least to cover the box so that it couldn't be found. He smoothed over the dirt, packing the sod down on it.

Puzzled, he rode away. He left Hank Mackinson's horse standing guard. The gray looked after him and nickered lonesomely and trotted a few paces. Then he turned back and stopped near the ridge.

"That fellow sure loved his master. Shows me more than anything Hank said that the Mackinsons can't be bad people. Never knew a man who was good to his horse that wasn't human as hell."

HE WAS on the trail to Marysville. Dalton scanned the vista in all directions, hoping he hadn't been seen covering over the Wells Fargo box. He covered the miles

swiftly, seeing nothing, and rode into the relay station two hours late.

He explained that his horse had thrown a shoe and he'd stopped at a ranch smithy's to have him reshod. He was relieved of the mail, and after a drink at the station and a bite to eat, he rode quickly out of town. He took another trail, leaving the worn road. He was free of responsibility now; not for another forty-eight hours would he be needed.

Dalton passed the ridge, saw Hank's horse still standing there. A few black specks were moving against the azure. The sun was going down in an explosion of pastel colors and quaint sky architecture. There were pink and lavender castles and drawbridges and orange and lemon towers. There were white sails moving in the deep blue and with the lonely dusk came fireflies and pestering insects that stuck to the sweat on his face.

He had left the unusual, uniquely-formed ridge and could no longer see the faithful gray standing guard over his master's grave. The thought of it gave him a lonely feeling and he reached down and patted Sullivan's finely arched neck. The country was level out here, flat prairie, with an occasional growth of buckbrush and cottonwoods. He rounded a bend and crossed a wagon bridge and then saw the town, in the shape of twinkling lamps all agleam across a mile of level countryside. But it was after eight o'clock when he entered the narrow main street of this Kansas settlement.

A twin row of cottonwood trees ran along the thoroughfare, deepening the shadows and making the warmth of those saffron lights more pronounced as they flooded out of the buildings. A saloon flamed almost as brilliant as raw fire, close by. Men stomped along indolently beneath the wooden awnings. There was the sound of drums and a piano somewhere. Coming upon a watering trough John Dalton let his pony drink, sparingly, then moved on into the first livery stable he came to. When his horse clumped into the barn a hostler appeared magically and hung a lantern on a birch post in the areaway and the lamp's shine was on Dalton's face.

He did not pay a second look but knew the attendant was small and straight and slim. He wore a wool hat pulled well down on his head, a hat that seemed to be out of proportion with the size of him.

"Give my horse grain," Dalton said. "But you needn't remove the saddlegear."

The hostler nodded but did not speak. Dalton glanced curiously at him. His eyes were shining in the lantern light, a jade green, with long sandy lashes. The mouth was small in the thin face, piquant, feminine. The chin had a nice roundness and a dimple that made itself prominent when the muscles moved in the smooth face. The shoulders were narrow, and nicely rounded, too. The bib of his overalls, drawn up over his bosom, did not hide the telltale evidence that Dalton was seeking. Here was a girl trying to be a boy, so damnably womanish in her form she couldn't fool a blind man. About eighteen, Dalton reflected. A good shape and a pair of sharp but lovely eyes.

"All right, Miss," he said, "how much do I owe you, and be quick."

"Fifty cents." Her voice was just as charming as her beauty. "Exactly fifty cents." Then suspiciously, "You say leave him saddled?"

Dalton nodded, his interest piqued. He tossed the girl a silver dollar. "Buy you a cigar," he said chidingly. "A good strong one."

"And see what happens to me," she chortled. "No, thanks, but I'll keep the change."

He stomped on out, paying her no more attention. It was strange, though, how completely he failed in his effort to drive the girl's picturesque face out of his thoughts. It was only the grimness of his purpose in Troy that aided him. After leaving the barn, he loitered on the sidewalk a few minutes. He fashioned a cigarette, standing in the shadows of an awning in front of a feed store. The windows of this false-front were dark. He could hear men

talking up and down the street. They sat on benches and chairs, some tipped back against the walls. They did not concern him. Booted riders, with spurs tinkling, passed him, and an occasional pedestrian headed for the saloon across the narrow dusty road. He decided on a drink, and sauntered across the street to the slapping batwings of the Elite Parlors. A man came out as he went in, and glanced quickly around. But Dalton was sure this did not mean anything.

"Wonder why he looked back?" he said to himself. He dragged in a deep draught of smoke. He had debated about stepping boldly into the lamplight of the saloon. The ambusher for all he knew had seen him and might right now be in Troy. But he realized now that it was an important step. If he didn't, and the man had recognized him, they would be on his heels at once. Of course provided the man was the ambusher. Dalton was sure he would not come alone. Such men usually didn't.

"I've got," he reflected morosely, "to go through with what I've started." The renegades who had been pursuing him and the mail had been ditched. They would have no crow to pick with him since the mail was no longer in his possession.

DALTON shouldered through the batwings. At the bar across the rear, he took two drinks of whiskey and, dawdling against the p[illegible] mahogany, studied the place th[illegible] the back-bar mirror.

It was almost packed, this long room. Smoke was thick enough to shoot holes in with a gun. Riders jingled their spurs on the bare floor restlessly, because they were getting drunk. A dozen poker tables were going in full play. A burly floorman elbowed his way through the crowd and spangled, painted women plied their trade. Everybody at the games seemed to be talking at once. "Two kings will take this pot," one said. Dalton set his empty glass down.

"New around here?" asked the barkeep, peering sharply at the P.E. rider.

"What do you think?" he countered.

"I never saw you before." The bartender was immaculate, in a white shirt and black string tie. He wore black sideburns and had a wide thin mouth and high cheek bones. He was sallow and his dark eyes were sharp.

"Well, I reckon I'm new here if you ain't never seen me before," said Dalton, his eyes casually returning to the mirror.

Old Jen could handle a whip.

He saw something that quickened his interest. In a far corner of the room near the dance-hall partition, two men had their shoulders tipped against the rough pine wall. They were gazing at him with more than an ordinary attention. One was a giant, well over six feet—and wide from the waist up. He had the slim legs of a good rider; his hair was iron gray. His heavy black shell belt was studded with cartridges and held a holster and a six gun with an ivory handle. He had a lean, embittered mouth. He had to bend down to hear his companion who was talking. They suddenly separated, and Dalton lost them in the crowd. He was unable to follow the tall man because there were others as tall all over the room. This seemed to be a country of big men.

The Pony Express rider quickly edged toward the door. There was one way he saw it. His chances would be better outside. Even with the lamplight there were shadows that were friendly.

He hesitated on the planks, with a warm breeze touching his face. A small figure detached itself from the wall. Dalton had him covered before he took two steps. He seemed to be smothering in sinister air. He could feel a hidden rifle trained on him. But this, he reasoned, was no doubt his imagination inspired by the existence of the ambusher. He wheeled away and pressed his shoulders against a solid wall of pine.

"No use gunnin' me down," said the little man. "Helen wants to talk to you."

"Helen Mackinson?" Dalton steadied his voice.

"I'm not tellin' you anything but Helen," was the cold rejoinder. "Only that you'd better not buck in the tugs."

"I don't feel any tugs around me." Dalton's voice was cold and incisive. "Nor see any."

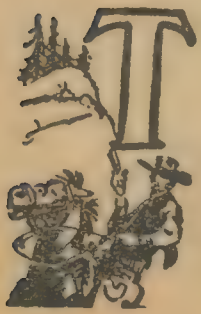
"You're spunky. But bein' a stranger here accounts for that. Helen wants for me to fetch you to her. There's a gun trained on you that you don't see."

So it wasn't his imagination. He felt that gun. He'd been feeling it ever since he'd engaged in the fight with the ambusher and had seen Hank Mackinson die from a furtive slug. But he wanted to see Helen and welcomed this chance. He had the message to deliver from her dying relative.

"All right," he conceded, "you know where she is; take me along to her."

"That," said his diminutive companion, "is being a good sport."

2



THE LITTLE man led the Pony Express rider into an alley beside the Elite Parlors. Following through blackness as complete as ink—it was like being in a huge bottle of it—Dalton kept alert. The lights behind them were inadequate; he could not see where he was putting his feet. There was nothing in the way on the ground. His companion seemed to be able to penetrate the darkness with a feline's expertness for suddenly he stopped and gave three hard knuckled raps on a door in the wall.

Dalton muttered, not unfriendly-like, "Brother, you've got a cat's eyes."

"I've been here before," Dalton heard him say. "A thousand times before. But the way he's been picking us off, this may be the last time."

Dalton nodded imperceptibly, thinking of the coward who had dry-gulched Hank. One man had the hell scared out of all of them. Hank had said it was a man, but Dalton remembered that he had heard a woman's voice in those bushes.

But he could understand this grave fear of the man they couldn't see, of that constant hidden gun being on them. One man could destroy an army, one by one, over a long enough span of time.

The door creaked open, after he heard a chain's heavy rattle. "Go on in," said Dalton's companion. "I'm right behind you." Dalton emerged into a room that was, he realized, directly behind the bar. There was a little window, closed now, in the wall, and through this he was sure he had been watched while the barkeep asked his curious question. All the noise of the saloon's business came through in muted proportions.

There were four people—the guide, the tall, wide man and a black-clad youth with a sharp face and yellow hair. And then there was the girl—Her hair was the color of a tiger, and her eyes as green as any jungle cat's that Dalton had ever imagined. She was built like a Grecian goddess, like Helen of Troy. Her bosom was shapely, deep and through the sheer material of her blue shirt her breasts were ostentatious. Her face was big-boned, but elegant of contour. None of her singular features detracted from a downright compelling loveliness. Her mouth was small, pulsating with life and her long tan

lashes failed to mask the emotional life in her eyes. Here was a vibrant young woman, high-spirited, capable of going from one extreme to the other; there would be no middle ground. She wore black riding breeches that did not hide the splendid symmetry of her limbs. She was long-legged and small around the waist.

He had eyes for only the blonde female, purring, sleek and attended by her wily keepers, exultant and at once as sultry as a South American breeze. A man would love her in ten minutes and she would love a man as soon as that, if she wanted him. There would be no red tape. She dwarfed all other women that John Dalton had ever known, even the beauties he had seen on the opera house stage in Saint Joe.

All this the P. E. rider gathered at a glance. But he had been long enough at it to draw impatient grunts from the woman's companions. *Maybe,* he reflected, *I have been a little too bold, a little too hungry.*

"You're looking at Helen," said his guide. "Take off your hat, please. If you've had an ounce of decent training, you will bow to her."

DALTON swept his flat-crowned hat from his black head. His gallant bow was more chivalrous than he figured it was. He stood straight, his spurred heels together, his one sixty-five of steel and iron poised neatly and composedly before her Majesty. She was almost as tall as he was.

There was a strange, apparent, physical strength in every line of her.

The blond youth in black stepped quickly forward. He said in a low voice: "What are you doing in Troy? You rode in here from the west. Who are you? Why did you come here?"

"I guess," Dalton said slowly and calmly, "I've a right to go where I please. Is this town under quarantine? Is there smallpox here, or something of an equally contagious nature, that makes the town unhealthy for strangers?"

"You've said it, stranger." The blond man in black uncovered his head, too. They stood there, their eyes meeting. Dalton saw, in the slim youth beside the girl, a resemblance to the man he had seen die in the arroyo.

"You brought me here," Dalton said. "But I was coming anyhow. I bear a message for Helen Mackinson, from Hank. He's dead. He said to tell you it was the ambusher that done it. I guess you know what he meant."

He watched those dark green eyes, beheld a faint stiffening of the muscles in her pallid face, a quickening of lips as they parted and closed and opened again. He saw a dull look of pain in her unusual orbs, pain as wicked as knife-thrusts.

Out of his blue shirt where he had placed it, Dalton produced the hickory handle of the gun Hank had asked him to take in, and he presented it to the boy with the yellow hair.

"So he got Hank, too," Helen Mackinson muttered. She covered her face with her long hands and turned her back to Dalton. She stood thus a moment. She swung back around slowly. "What is your name?"

"John Dalton."

She considered it thoughtfully, deeply, then said, "I have never heard the name before. Where did you come from?"

"Saint Joe," he said. "I was a P. E. rider, but need a job now. I found Hank and he decided me on my future course for the next few hours; I don't like ambushers. But I said I'd deliver Hank's message and I reckon that's where my duty ends. Only I'm in Troy, and I don't intend to leave here till I've had a good night's rest." He paused, and when nobody spoke, he added, "He said the Mackinsons were going, one by one—that you would be the last. I left his horse out there standing guard over him. You'd better get some one out after his body."

"Hank was my brother," she said. "What he told you is the truth." She breathed deeply; her heavy young breasts rose and fell. Her eyes, in

this moment of suffering, were the most beautiful Dalton had ever see a woman have. They were like transparent emeralds seen through illuminated blue silk.

A coarse voice cut in on his thoughts, acridly, a voice as icy as death and as encompassing. "How we know you're telling the truth?" it said, with a trace of mockery in it. "How we know you're not the dry-gulcher, here to taunt us because we're helpless? You've got to have more proof than you've shown, mister, to convince me."

Dalton got in the first shot.

The wide, gray man was harshly abhorrent. The rider with the slim legs and a bull-dogger's torso reached out to grasp Dalton's shoulders, standing almost a head taller. But the latter's quickness enabled him to avoid the groping hands.

"I don't owe you anything, and if you lay your dirty paws on me I'll do more than just cry about it, fella. I'm not tough, but I can take my part. I came here because Hank Mackinson died out there in the sun, with a coward's bullet in his chest. I liked Hank in the few minutes I knew him, the same as I don't like you in the few minutes I've known you. I'm that way. He made a grand exit, and I liked him for it; I brought his message. Just stay away from me now and we'll get along. I'm going out that door the way I came in, walking. I've got a gun that'll gamble I can do it. I'm going to try anyhow."

"Bartles, you keep out of this." Helen Mackinson turned hotly and disdainfully to confront the giant. "This isn't your business and you stay out of it." She turned back, her face a little flushed, her eyes darker now with the anger that surged through her. "You're free to go, Dalton. I thank you for what you've done. Please overlook this crudeness on my foreman's part. We're in a bad shape; one man against all of us—one against all the Mackinsons. We don't know who nor why. We've been that way for a year. He killed my father, four of my brothers and there's only four of us left. We go out and try to find him, and we don't come back. Hank tried and lost. The ambusher is waiting; he's out there now. We don't know who will be next."

Dalton thought swiftly, felt that old deep stirring of pity again. He straightened up, fashioned a cigarette. The girl paced the floor. Suddenly she said, "Tell us where to find the body. Is it near that ridge five miles west of here?"

He gave her the location of Hank's temporary grave.

"You guide us," she said, sweeping the lantern down from a peg in the wall where it hung. "And we'll take a buckboard and get him. If you will, please."

"I'll do it," he said quickly. He could have added and told the truth, "I would do anything for you."

At that moment there came a heavy pounding on the door. "Whorton," said a falsetto voice. "It's me, the Judge—"

Helen unchained the door. The newcomer was short, stout and grizzled. He had a cherubic, pinkish face and merry blue eyes. He wore a tall gray hat, a scarlet vest bearing a double row of polished pearl buttons. Across his little paunch was a heavy watch chain, and for a fob on another piece of chain was a twenty dollar gold piece. There was a diamond stud in his ruffled shirt front. His frock coat was black and clean and his trousers were so tight of fit that he looked like a character out of Charles Dickens. He wore high heeled shoes and gaiters.

"Judge Whorton," Helen said, "Hank's been killed. Yes, the same way. We're going out after his body now. John Dalton here, a former Pony Express rider, brought us the news. He saw Hank shot down but didn't see the ambusher. He's out on the ridge. They've all died out there."

The Judge nodded, smiled at Dalton. "Real favor you did Helen," he said, "riding in here with the news. When did it happen?"

Dalton hesitated, then said, "This afternoon. I was a little late getting in—my horse is lame."

"He wasn't lame when you rode him into the stable," rapped Bartles. "I don't like the smell of this thing, Judge. For all we know—"

"I warned you, Bartles," Helen Mackinson interposed. "But we're leaving now; we can't leave him out there any longer."

"I'll troop along," said Judge Whorton wiping the sweat band of his high silk hat. "I'm sorry to hear about Hank, Helen."

"The Judge," Helen said, giving Bartles a curt menacing glance, "is an old friend of our family. He was my father's closest friend."

"That I was," said the pink faced old man.

THE FOLLOWING two hours held an experience for John Dalton that merely deepened his interest in the girl and her trouble. He rode in the buckboard with her, because she had requested him to. He left Sullivan at the stable, dropping in to look him over while Helen and the girl attendant talked and Jean and Bartles hitched a team to the buckboard. Riding horses behind the vehicle were Jean and the pudgy little judge who refused to ride in the spring wagon. Bartles led the way.

The moon was bright and stars twinkled with an irridescence that matched diamonds in a necklace. The perfume of the countryside in the cooling air was reminiscent of fresh roses gathered in a garden of flowers. Dalton drove, and Helen talked in a low voice.

"Why did you leave your horse saddled at the barn?" she asked.

He smiled to himself. "I didn't figger on staying all night," he said. "Figgered I'd ride on into Saint Joe. You needn't be uneasy about me, Miss Mackinson; I didn't kill Hank Mackinson."

"Did you see him killed?" The question was quiet, casual, but there was a touch of mistrust in it.

He did not answer immediately, he could get caught up if he wasn't careful; then Dalton suddenly realized that he had already let himself in for more suspicion than he cared to bear on his shoulders. If one of these men happened to be the ambusher, he was already in possession of the facts. He would think that Hank had told Dalton more than he had disclosed. If this was true he was marked for death, too. "Yes," he said. "I saw him when the bullet hit him. I fired a couple of shots at the ambusher, could see his shadow moving in the brush. But I don't think I hit him."

"You didn't see him well enough to know what he looked like?" she asked, and there was no longer mistrust in her voice. "Did you, Dalton?"

"No, the sun was too bright," he said. "But I saw something red. It might have been a man's shirt, I don't know."

She gave a little start, then relapsed into a strange silence. He could feel her crowding closer to him on the high spring seat. The warmth of her body was comforting because of the chill of the night. Dalton gazed down at the jouncing yellow lantern and was carried back through the years to the time when he had taken his first sweetheart to a country dance in his father's carriage. He spoke gently, not wishing to deepen her worry.

"Just why are you all marked by this madman?" he asked. "What does he want, why does he wish to kill all the Mackinsons? How does it happen that after a whole year he hasn't been apprehended or even found out?"

"It's a long story," she whispered,

"and I'm not ready to tell you yet about the trail that leads up to Hank's death. I have seen them all brought home like this—Tommy, Jackson, Fred and now Hank. Jean and Charley are left. Charley is the small one that brought you to me. We knew you were in town; you were seen riding your horse into the stable and coming from the west. Besides, Carol Jennifer—she's the hostler at the stable and owns it—reported to Bartles that you left your saddle on your horse."

"Who," he asked, without showing the interest he felt in the girl, "is that strange little character? In what way is she connected with the case, or is she?"

Helen shook her head and the starlight was in her green eyes when she peered at him. "Why do you ask about her?" Then she laughed. "Oh, of course I know. It's because she's trying so hard to take a man's place in the world. She's twenty. Her grandfather made a fortune in the early days and was in business with Dad. Her father's in the penitentiary at Lansing. He was an owlhoot—robbed a lot of stagecoaches; she's trying to live it down. Her grandfather, however, was a fine country gentleman, he paid his debts and clung to his honor to his dying day. Dad thought an awful lot of him and Judge Whorton."

Dalton nodded, did not say any more. He listened to the creaking wagon wheels. They were rendering a regular tune. He connected the tune, could have whistled it, which he did under his breath. *Oh, my darling Clementine.* Funny how those wheels seemed to be singing. The tune became fairly haunting.

"Tell me," he said, popping his whip over the team, because they were lagging too far behind Bartles, "don't you have any idea of who could be doing the killing or why?"

"No," was her candid rejoinder. "I've tried hard for months to figger it out, and I can't. But all of the Mackinsons seem to meet their death right out there by that ridge."

He suddenly thought of the Wells Fargo strong box he had accidentally uncovered. Sweat, cold and tedious, rivered down his face. He felt a quickening of his pulse. It was funny how this had escaped his memory up until now. It was all he could do to control himself now, because he had an impulse to tell Helen Mackinson. Cold reason, however, warned him; it was not time for that. He would wait. But as his nerves began to tingle and the importance of his discovery began to settle with its full weight upon his brain, his lean mouth became a firmly locked steel trap. There were two things men killed for. Women and money....

3

THEY reached the ridge and found the horse still standing near his master's grave. Helen cried, and rushed up to him. "Tracy," she sobbed. "Poor old Tracy. You wouldn't leave him—"

Dalton felt something choking him as he trudged up the embankment, with Bartles and the Judge following him. They worked in silence, uncovered the stiffened body and rolled it in blankets. Bartles avoided looking at Dalton. They rubbed elbows, twice they came closer together, but Dalton did not say anything. He could read the warning in the cold slate gray eyes of the foreman. They were wringing wet with sweat when they got the body down to the buckboard and loaded. Helen had led Tracy off a little piece but now the horse nickered, making a mournful sound that stirred Dalton. He walked over the undulating ground then, to where Helen and the horse stood. Tracy was trying to pull free, and Dalton said, "Let him go, Miss; he'll just go over there and sniff of Hank and be easier. That's all they ever do. It's all a big mystery to him; he just can't understand why his boss isn't here and he is worried after the

fashion of smart horses. Let him loose, please."

Helen obeyed him and Tracy walked quickly to the buckboard and dipped his head down, nosing at the blanketed corpse, and then he lifted his head, pawed the ground with both forefeet and nickered again. Then he just calmy stood there, shaking his head up and down and occasionally making another peculiar sound.

Bartles and the Judge had walked off a slight distance, and Bartles called to Dalton through the moonlight. "Here, you, come and give us a few facts about how the fight took place."

Dalton frowned, moved away from Helen. She covered her face with her hands and sobbed quietly, and Dalton knew the depth of her bereavement. Here was a girl who could feel, so deeply that her hurt was stronger and more lasting than surface tears.

"The ambusher was over there in that patch of buckbrush," Dalton pointed out. "I was coming down the arroyo, seeking water for my horse. I heard the rifle shot and saw Hank running through the sun. He tried to hit the drygulcher with slugs from his pistol, but as you can see the brush is too far away. A good fifty yards away, too far for effective revolver shooting. I yelled at him to get down, but he didn't heed me. Then a slug hit him. He stood up quite a while on his feet and I drove the ambusher away—or I guess I did—with my carbine."

"You didn't see the man?" the little judge asked, rubbing his red vest. "You didn't see hide nor hair of him?"

"All I saw—" Dalton paused, something ripped through his mind. The red vest the Judge wore—! He had seen a moving patch of red in the bushes. But—he almost laughed out loud. That pudgy little Santa Claus a killer! It was too ridiculous to think about. "All I saw," he finished, "was something scarlet, about the color of your vest, Judge, shining through the foliage. But I didn't mean to imply it was you, your honor."

The kid stood the man off with a shotgun.

They laughed. "I hope not," said Whorton, wiping the sweat band of his gray topper and putting it back on his head. He began to finger his gold watch fob that dangled on the heavy chain. "No, of course not, son; I know you wouldn't imply that."

"Just for fun," Dalton said, "I'm going to take a walk over to that briar patch." He stomped away, figuring the judge would follow him. But the latter turned, instead, to the ridge. Bartles was already on the far side of the ditch, out of sight. When Dalton got to the bushes, he found evidence of where somebody had moved around in the soft grass. It was smashed down and he could almost make out the imprint of a body.

Been lying here and waiting, he reflected. *For some reason, the Mackinsons all come out here to die. Is it that Wells Fargo box they're after an' the ambusher is after it, too, and can't find it? Does he kill them for fear they will stumble across it?*

Did he have part of the solution there? The problem assumed gigantic proportions. If it was the box the killer wanted, then Dalton alone, and the Mackinsons, of course, were the only ones who knew it was buried out here. Right now the two Mackinson brothers, and Bartles and even the judge, were looking suspiciously

around the ridge. What were they doing? He gave a quick start when he thought of how he had unearthed the iron box and then covered it over. Would they be able to detect that? No, they were far away from the hiding place of the supposed treasure, Dalton saw when he peered through the bushes.

He bent a closer scrutiny to the ground and saw nothing further to interest him. He studied the imprint of the body in the moonlight, and then bent quickly forward. *"Unless he was doubled up,"* he said to himself, *"when he was lying here in wait like a mountain cat, his head and his feet are pretty close together."*

HE STEPPED out into the full light of the moon and stood there, staring at the arroyo and Helen and the buckboard. She was alone with the corpse now, crying, and Dalton felt deeply stirred. He wished he could look after her and safeguard her from the stalker who knew no mercy and would kill her when her time came. He remembered Hank's words; the ambusher would save her for the last.

He approached the ridge. He was walking hurriedly and suddenly he heard the explosion of a gun. He reared back as a sharply stinging furrow was cut through his skull. Blood at once wet and warm and sticky as glue ran down into his eyes. He was drunk for a moment, staggered and almost fell.

He did not know at first how bad the wound was, only that if the slug had pierced his head he wouldn't be standing up now and feeling with exploratory fingers to find the wound. Somebody yelled and Bartles came scrambling through the moonlight and the starlight, yelling hoarsely, "Good Gawd, it was an accident, man! Of all the damned fool things—"

He was panting and the judge was right behind him. Then came Helen and her two brothers. Dalton was surrounded and the judge was peering gravely at his scalp, and running his pudgy fingers over the furrow cut by the bullet.

"Nicked, that's all," he maintained stoutly. "But it was close. How in tarnation, Bartles—"

"I was coming down off the end of the ridge," Bartles said heavily. "I lost my footing—fell and rolled; you saw me, Judge. The gun went off accidentally; you know how I keep my Colts filled to the quick."

Helen was holding a blood-soaked handkerchief to the wound. It wasn't bleeding profusely now. Dalton smiled grimly and stooped to pick up his hat. It had fallen through his stumbling to hold himself erect. "You owe me a new Stetson, Bartles," he said; "we'll let it go at that."

"But," said the foreman in his deep, querulous voice, "suppose I had killed you?"

"Well, it would've still been an accident," Dalton said slowly, "but you might've had a hard job proving it."

Helen Mackinson was so close to him now he could smell the fragrance of her body. Her warmth, coming through her thin garments, soothed him and at the same time made his heart beat faster.

She relieved the tension. Dalton had meant to imply that he believed the shooting had been deliberate; he was sure Bartles understood him.

"Let's get back to Troy," she said, "and quickly. Come on, Dalton, you will ride with me as before."

Bartles and the Judge mounted their horses, and Dalton tethered Tracy to the rear of the buckboard. The two Mackinsons brought up the rear. For this Dalton was grateful; he didn't feel safe with Bartles behind him. He was not sure of the Judge either, since the shooting. It had all struck him as being a put-up job; the Judge had not shown enough concern. But Bartles would bear watching. Why the man hated him enough to kill him, Dalton did not know.

Helen had very little to say, but the accident had seemed to bring them closer together. It were as if he had known her all his life. She was about the only one in this group that he could honestly trust, unless

he could rely on her brothers. After all they were Mackinsons—and Hank had said they didn't shoot people in the back.

He could believe this. The lantern bounced on the baseboard and Helen leaned close to him, solemn with the dignity that heavy grief had placed upon her. It was a strange funeral cortege.

With the corpse unloaded and in the burial parlor, Helen ordered them all home. It was nearly daybreak now, and she said to Dalton, "If you will be our guest for a few days, Dalton, I'll surely appreciate it. For some reason, I don't want you to leave me."

He was amazed at this statement, this candor, but he could understand it. They returned the buckboard to the stable and got their horses. Carol Jennifer watched them drive into the stable. She was as wide awake as ever, and as comely, Dalton thought. He put the rig away, himself, and returned to the office. The women were standing in the jonquil lamp light and he had a better chance to size up this young woman who wanted to take a man's place in the world. She was, despite her mannish attire, sultry; she had a strong, wiry body. She was not quite as heavy as Helen, but she had a greater suppleness. She was like a pine sapling. But there was something in her mouth he did not like. It was a glacier-like coldness; it could be tempting and exotically warm, or it could be cruel. Her eyes, too, failed to inspire him. They were hard, fearless, with a cat's intensity of gaze.

He left them and brought up his horse. Helen was already mounted and waiting for him. He tossed the attendant another silver dollar. "Buy you another cigar," he said lightly. "And smoke it."

"If you'll smoke one with me," she said coquettishly, "I'll take you up on that. I don't like a dare or a challenge."

"The next time I see you," Dalton promised, leaning back in his saddle and looking at her, spotting the singular passion in her eyes, something he had missed entirely before, "we'll both smoke cigars together."

They laughed and said good night, and Helen rode expertly ahead of him to the watering trough. "I don't like to take chances on what she does for the horses that's left there," she said. "I don't mean to be catty, but I'll be safe by watering Dixie."

"I'll play safe, too," he said. "I figger you and I have just about got the same opinion of the young lady."

"She could be terrible if she wanted to be," Helen Mackinson expostulated. "They say she's got the very devil in her. But—let's change the subject."

THEY RODE home side by side, legs rubbing and Helen planning the funeral of her brother. Dalton doffed his hat, looked at the hole through the crown and reflected, *I might be in the same boat, crossing the Jordan with Hank if that slug had been a wee bit lower—say a half an inch.* Helen stared at him. "I was only thinking," he told her.

"You don't need to tell me what's in your mind, Dalton," she said. "Whom are we to trust?"

"You can trust me," he said. "Don't have any doubts; I'll stand by you, until we find the ambusher."

"Is that a definite promise?"

He said it was.

Then she told him how it happened that she was called Helen of Troy. Her father had once owned the town. She still had business interests there: the lumberyard, the Elite Parlors, and the one feed store. Her income was not great but sufficient to enable her to keep up with her indebtedness. She had suffered heavy losses due to two years of draught, when water had been so scarce her cattle had died in the fields.

He thought again of the Wells Fargo strong box and wondered what it contained. There were two things men killed for. Yes, he knew because he could recall many instances where men had left the straight path for the owlhoot and of cases where good men had spoiled their lives because they had killed over women.

Bartles' gun was out.

Hostlers took their horses, and Helen led Dalton across the portico of the big ranch-house. The others had already arrived; Judge Whorton had come along to help make arrangements for Hank's funeral. It was quite daybreak now and breakfast would be served presently in the dining room, it was announced by Helen.

Dalton was surprised to find such a large-sized living room. It was, in fact, the largest room he had ever seen.

It was fully three quarters of the lower floor of the sprawling, majestic building. Above it, reached by a winding stairway, an overhanging gallery ran around the four sides; off the gallery opened a number of doors. Dalton, looking it over, considered the place more like an army barracks than a ranchhouse. But this was merely a swiftly passing reflection, for his attention traversed the room to the enormous fireplace beneath the far gallery and fastened itself upon the gray woman standing there.

Helen, beside the Pony Express rider, said placidly, "Aunt Roberta," and walked on up to the straight, prim figure in the voluminous black dress and took both her hands.

Aunt Roberta's cane was in her hand, and she lifted it to point it directly at Dalton. "That man," she said sternly, "is a stranger under this roof. You know how we feel about strangers? Where is Tom Bartles?"

Bartles slid quickly and arrogantly to the side of the imperious old woman. He bowed his close-cropped gray head. He raised one of her hands and kissed the tips of her fingers. Then he straightened up and stood beside her.

"I do not approve of strangers, either," he stated brusquely, and gave Dalton a savage look.

"He is my friend, Aunt Roberta," said Helen Mackinson. She turned to face the P. E. rider. "Come on up and meet my aunt. She is the only one of us who is safe from the ambusher. She stays in the house. Two years ago she fell and injured her hip; she can leave the house only in a wheelchair. Aunt Roberta," she finished, wheeling on her flat boot heels again, "this is John Dalton, a former Pony Express rider."

The old lady sized him up and he bowed civilly. She seemed pleased. But she was as austere, as imperious as an ancient queen.

"Hank was killed this afternoon," Helen Mackinson said, breaking the news gently. "Out by the Samson ridge."

Aunt Roberta had colorless eyes. They seemed to be sightless, but Dalton felt the intensity of her strong gaze on his face. He watched her expression, but not a single muscle moved in that placid face that he could see.

"Hank," she murmured, and a moment later she waved her cane. "Bartles, take me to my room. Hank—" She bowed her head as Bartles quickly gave her his arm. He walked her slowly to a door at the east end of the room. He opened it for her. She stopped, staring back at the huddled figures near the fire. "Will there be no end to this thing?" she cried, in a touching voice, heavy with grief. "Will he kill all of us and escape punishment? What's the matter with all you men, that you can't stop him? Why don't you find the ambusher? I wish to God I were a man. As old as I am I would do something!"

She then entered the room under

the gallery and slammed the door shut behind her.

AFTER breakfast was served in a large dining room, Dalton repaired to the quarters to which he had been assigned, hoping to get a few hours sleep. It was a small compact room, with a bed in one corner, a bureau and two chairs. He lay down on the bed, after removing his shirt and boots, and was soon sound asleep. He was aroused by a sound of voices under his window, through which the sun shone bright and hot. He got up, yawned. Bartles and the Judge were talking outside, and Jean Mackinson stood off to one side, peering up at Dalton's window.

I believe they're talking about me, Dalton thought. He dressed hurriedly and left the room, going out across the portico. He did not join them, but went straight to the barn. He saw that Sullivan had been fed and stood with his arm around the pony's neck. The mystery of the whole thing had begun to prey heavily on his mind. Dalton was sure now that he had stepped into a situation that had been gathering like a storm for months and was about to break. He recalled that he had heard a woman's voice in the buckbrush and that he had found the imprint of a small body in the buffalo grass. *Just about the length of the little judge or that girl at the stable in Troy.* Startled, with these thoughts entering his mind and shuttling back and forth, he bent down and picked up a stick, broke it in two, and was about to reach for his pocket knife when he heard some one enter the barn. The building was a long, low structure, with a dozen small stalls jammed together in the rear. Horses were eating and the noise caused him to lose the other's furtive progress, but he knew somebody was looking at him. The sinister air again encompassed him. Dalton was being watched, and he could feel an invisible gun trained on him. He stepped cautiously around Sullivan and sidled along the wall beyond the stall. Here there was a narrow aisle that led out into a larger front room filled with vehicles of sundry kinds. The rank smell of livestock and manure was pungent and it was hot under the barn's low roof. Sweat dripped from his face.

He saw the man standing against a birch post, just loitering there. He saw Dalton at the same time. "I've been waiting for you," Bartles said. "Me and you are going to have a talk."

Dalton walked boldly up to him. "I have nothing to discuss with you," he said.

"Oh, but you have." Bartles was sullen, menacing. He was a head taller than Dalton and his shoulders were broader. "I don't want you around here. The place ain't big enough for both of us, and I'm not satisfied with your story; it just don't make sense. I'm ordering you out, and if you know what's good for you, you'll start riding at once. This affair is no concern of yours; you've stuck yourself into business that don't concern you."

"It's my business any time when people are being helplessly murdered," Dalton flung back at him. "What's the matter—you getting scared of me?"

"Take your coat off and we'll see whether I am or not." Bartles took his hands out of his pockets. "You've got your chance to go now, without getting mussed up. I don't like you; have I made that plain enough?"

"Yeah, I got that when you took a pot shot at me and claimed it was an accident," Dalton countered. "All right, fella, I'm taking my coat off. I don't like to brawl, but there's only one way to settle our differences." He whipped his light coat off and cast it aside. "I'm staying here if I have to fight every damned one of you."

Bartles' lips curved to a cruel crescent. He sighed enormously and rubbed his palms on the knees of his dungarees. He backed off three long steps. "Come on and get it, fella," he said. "Every time we meet, we'll fight, if I don't kill you this time. I want to smash your face."

He swung hard with his right hand, missed Dalton and the latter drove a hard fist into his mouth. He caught it open and cut his knuckles

against the other man's sharp teeth. Swiftly, with superior agility, he sent a short left blow to his adversary's stomach. Wind spewed out of Bartles. He bent down and got a rabbit punch on the back of his neck. Dalton moved away, knowing this fight was far more significant than a mere brawl between men who didn't like each other; he had felt it coming all along. Bartles shuffled forward, flicking out a long right hand that spun Dalton completely around. He knew Bartles wasn't going to be easy to take.

But the latter was slow and his slugging arms moved without dexterity; his cudgeling fists passed over their mark. He was trying hard to end the scrap with one blow. His greed and anxiety left him open to a series of stinging, peppering blows that blinded him.

He swung away then, grunting, spitting out blood. A chopping, hairy fist axed Dalton to his knees. He took the blow on top of the head. It seemed the other's fist buried itself in his skull. He felt the jolt in his neck, along his spine. It had almost paralyzed him.

Bartles uttered lurid oaths and jumped forward, sensing his advantage. His bony face was set in deep cruel lines. He grabbed the dazed Pony Express rider by the hair. He reared his head up. In the same motion he brought his left knee hard against Dalton's chin.

The latter tried to roll clear, but that sledge-like blow on the chin sent him over. It was a killing impact. He fell, almost with his head striking the birch post, smashing his face in the stinking wet straw on the floor.

He was half paralyzed, but he wasn't out. Dalton's brain had cobwebs in it, but there were some cells unimpaired. Then his antagonist did a crazy thing. It was crazy because it was without logic. But when men are mad enough to kill, logic doesn't enter into it. Bartles flung himself upon the sweating man he had knocked down.

His intentions were obvious. He again grabbed Dalton by the hair. He shoved his victim's face against the birch post.

Straining, Dalton lifted himself to his knees. He suddenly reared upward and threw Bartles away from him. Bartles swore loudly, unable to handle Dalton because of his alacrity. He went over on his back and shoved out with his heels. He caught Dalton as the latter hurled himself forward. They were both on their backs now and Bartles was groping for his gun. Dalton rose up and threw himself upon the sprawling, slower man.

He pinned Bartles' gun hand; the latter still strove to pull the weapon. Dalton's grip on the cowboy's wrist tautened until it was like an iron clamp. He held the hand motionless, warded off Bartles' other hand with his shoulder. He pressed the fingers of his left hand deep into the throat of his antagonist. He exerted a killing, desperate effort to choke Bartles insensible.

The bigger man wriggled but could not get free. The hold on his throat was unbearable. He could not breathe. Dalton knew he had him now. He held on, breathing hard, almost sobbing. The pains that shuttled back and forth through his back and shoulders and in and out of his chest were more brutal than any he had ever experienced; he must not release that gun hand.

And then somebody said from the open sunlit door: "All right, boys, let's break it up. You can finish your argument some other time." Jean Mackinson was tugging at Dalton and trying to pull him free.

4

THE BIG ROOM was suddenly full of moving shadows as men poured into the barn. Helen Mackinson's voice was sedate but full of anger. Dalton let go, rolled over and heard Jean slapping Bartles' face on first one side and then the other.

"You almost finished him, Dalton," the Judge exclaimed, behind over the sprawling men.

"It's a pity he didn't," said Helen Mackinson. "I'm through with Bartles; he leaves this ranch and he never returns to it again."

Dalton was sitting up now, with his back against the wall, his head throbbing with pain and blood saturating his hands and his shirt. Charley Mackinson stopped and put his face close to Dalton's. "It was a damn poor thing to do, fightin' it out here in the barn alone, and the ambusher waitin' out there to get us and wondering who'll be next to step into his trap. Come out of it, Dalton. We're goin' to need you."

He did not quite know how he found his way to his feet. He didn't have any strength in his legs. But he was there, standing up and shaking all over, his body still in pain.

They walked him outside, Judge Whorton and Helen, and the fresh air sort of revived him.

She wanted to see him at once, she said, in her office. He found her there a little while later, after he'd administered to his bruised face, with Charley's help. He lay back in a big chair and Charley, who was an expert at this sort of thing, applied a stick of caustic to some of the broken places in the skin of his forehead. He felt considerably better, when Charley had finished with him, reaching the places he couldn't reach.

"I used to be a barber," Charley Mackinson said. And then he informed Dalton that this was to be his room as long as he was their guest. He was quite talkative and Dalton figgered it was a good chance to find out something.

"I'm in the dark, Charley," he said. "I don't know what this is all about. I stepped into danger blindly and I'm willing to see it through. Why is the ambusher sore enough at the Mackinsons to kill them off, one by one, in a cowardly way? Of course you don't have to tell me, but I think, since I've tossed my hat in with you—"

CHARLEY nodded, sat down on the bed and began to speak softly. A long time ago a man named Jennifer had robbed an overland Stagecoach and buried a strongbox that was supposed to be filled with gold. He sought shelter on the Mackinson place, where he was apprehended after Charley's father had treated his gunshot wounds, the elder Mackinson being somewhat of a doctor. Jennifer figured Mackinson had saved his life and knowing he was going to prison, he was supposed to have told Mackinson the hiding place of the Wells Fargo box. The man who'd aided Jennifer in the robbery had been killed out near the ridge; there had been two of them.

Because Mackinson knew the secret hiding place of the gold he was believed by many to have passed the secret down on to his children. "But that was all hogwash." Charley was serious, his somber face breaking out with longitudinal lines. "He never told none of us. However, we figger if the box is in existence now, it's concealed out there near the ridge. But because we are supposed to know, we are watched; when we go out there and don't find anything, we get knocked off. The ambusher figgers he's been seen and he takes no chances. That's the way I see it, anyhow."

"Mebbe there ain't no box out there," Dalton said. "You don't know for sure. Mebbe, too, Jennifer didn't tell your father where he hid it."

"I don't believe he did," said Charley. "My father was honest; he would have informed the authorities. He wouldn't have kept the secret because it would have made him a criminal. No, sir, accordin' to my way of thinkin', only one person knows where the box is and she's protectin' it for her father who is still alive and in prison. I've never breathed a word of this, but I'm talkin' now. She can't carry the box and she can't figger a way to get the gold out of it, or something, bein' alone. If she takes anyone in on the secret, then she'll be exposed and mebbe robbed. Carol is the ambusher; she can shoot straight and she's mean enough to do it. You can bet your boots she ain't got no help."

"If you think that why haven't

you done something about it?" Dalton asked.

Charley looked down his nose. "To tell the truth I used to be in love with her. But she done me dirty and —well, I've just got to do something about it now, for I can't see none of the others die like Hank and my other brothers did."

Dalton nodded, got up and put his coat on. "I'm going to see your sister," he said. "I may need you; stick around." He walked out of the room and straight to Helen's office. She was waiting for him.

"I've got a plan," she said. "You and I are going to stalk the stalker."

He leaned over her desk. "Helen," he said, taking the liberty of calling her by her first name, "I know all about the strong box, and it's out there. Don't hold anything back from me."

She half rose from her chair. "You know about the box?" she gasped.

"I do," he said. "I'll take Charley and we'll go out and get it. But tell me—do you think Carol Jennifer is the drygulcher, that she knows the hiding place of the box and is protecting it for her father?"

"That's absurd," she said. "Where did you get such a cock-and-bull story?"

"Why is it impossible?" he insisted.

"She couldn't be the killer—not Carol—"

"You can't be sure of anything now," he maintained. "We'll go out and get the box and put a stop to all this nonsense. We'll take several with us, and the ambusher will be afraid to strike."

"Are you sure you know it's there?" She seemed dubious.

"Come along," he said. "The sooner we get the job done, the sooner we're going to stop these killings."

She sprang quickly to her feet. They walked hurriedly outside and to the barn. Jean was there and so was Charley.

Jean said somberly, "Bartles took his things and left. He said to tell you, Dalton, he'd be waiting for you in town."

"Get the horses saddled," Helen ordered. "We're riding out to the ridge to get the box. Dalton found it."

CHARLEY and Jean Mackinson raced away, after a moment of complete dumfoundment. Ten minutes later they were on the trail to the Samson ridge. But they were not the only ones on that trail. Judge Whorton and a party were overhauled halfway to their destination.

"We figgered we'd go out and have a look in daylight at that ridge. I've been planning it for a long time and just putting it off. There's something somebody wants out there, who wants it bad enough to kill folks to get it." The Judge was obviously perturbed.

"It's time you were waking up," Dalton snapped. He cut in ahead of the party and Helen tried to keep abreast of him. Their ponies outraced the others. They reached the ridge a good ten minutes ahead of the large cavalcade that Whorton had formed, and Dalton swung down out of the saddle. He left his horse and walked around the ridge. Helen was still dismounting when the first crack of the rifle stopped Dalton, and sent him flat of his stomach on the ground. He heard Helen cry out something, and swung up on his elbows, with his saddle carbine lined on the buckbrush. He saw that same flash of red, and the rifle spewed another flame from the shelter of the bushes. He yelled at Helen.

"Get down on the ground," he cried. "Crawl over here with me. The others will hear the fire, and mebbe cut in behind the bushes. Hurry, but keep down."

He saw her crawling to him on her hands and knees, almost flat against the earth.

"This is going to be the showdown," he muttered. He sent a slug singing in its flat voice at the moving red target. It was a faint shifting crimson blur. The aimless wheel of fortune had pitched him into this, but he had no regret, no resentment —that was the way he felt. He knew that he would stand by Helen Mackinson, see her to safety. First thing

to count was saving her from the ambusher. Turning to glance back he saw her crawling toward him. She showed no fear. In this final moment, when the stalker was trying to kill her, she was as calm as she had ever been. It was her spirit, her courage, and nothing daunted her.

Her voice came to him. "Watch out, John—he's going to fire again. His rifle—"

A snakehead of dirt was kicked up in Dalton's face.

Dalton said, "I'll keep him busy. You get behind the ridge and stay there." A second puff of dust streaked the air and gravel hit his face. He shot back, twice, keeping his eye on that crimson target moving through the bushes. But he had to think about Helen; she was keeping down, but she was coming on. They were bracketed and unsheltered. Those slug would head them off no matter whether they went east or west. He opened up again, desperately trying for a hit. He could smell the grass the bullets scorched that rang around him. He got a handful of grass and pulled himself forward, dragging his carbine with his right hand. His next slug fanned straight into the red cloth, and then he knew the answer. A booby target.

He thumbed fresh cartridges into his gun. *I've got him now,* he thought. *I've been missing because he fooled me with that scarlet flag.* He cast another glance at Helen. She was closer to him now, in more danger than ever.

Dust banners had begun to paint a fog around them. He leveled the sights of his carbine full on the spot where the bushes were moving. And his squeezing finger drove a bullet into those rustling briars.

The buckbrush seemed alone now and more visible than ever—alone against the skyline. He heard the pounding hooves of the oncoming riders but they were several minutes away. They had heard the firing and had snapped out of their leisurely pace and were coming in a dead run, some of them yelling. Those spanging echoes were being driven across the flat prairie country. A second explosion of dust in his face was closer than the hazardous first close one. He winced and spat out the dirt. Helen was almost lying across his legs now, dragging herself by gripping the buffalo grass with both hands.

"You've got yourself into a hell of a mess because a woman asked you to," she said. There was grass stain on her face and dirt in her eyes. She grinned, and winced and rolled over against him when a slug hissed and skipped and ricocheted off a small stone.

"There's something the matter with his shooting," Dalton droned, trying again, "but I missed, too. I guess it must be the sun playing shadow tricks."

The thought that here was a soft warm woman lying against him went through him like fire. He reached up and shook her head, holding her chin. "You're a nervy runt," he said, and grinned so that his teeth showed in his powder blackened face.

She smiled and put her head against him and lay there breathing hard and as still as the unmoving grass.

"Mebbe he's just trying to scare us away from here," Helen said, speaking with her face against him.

"You're a crazy little rascal," he snapped. "You should've stayed in the shelter of the ridge."

"Says you." She laughed and moved now and her softness was comforting to him. "The air stinks with burned powder," she complained. "And I'm sweaty—"

"You suit me," he said. And now he saw a quick furtive movement in the briar patch and let go again. This time he yelled exultantly, "I got the deuce that time, Lady. I saw him rear up."

THOSE hard-riding men beyond the bend in the trail were beating up dust whorls and the yelling came closer. "You stay here," Dalton ordered Helen. "I'm running over there to see what I did with that lost shot; don't move."

He ran past the mouth of the ravine, and swerved off toward the buckbrush. He wasn't without due

caution. He could be mistaken. Maybe the sniper was playing a little ambush magic. If he went too close he might rear up with death spatting from both fists. Sunlight drummed against the gray surfaces of his eyes and was like a raw flame in his face. He covered the fifty yards, running bent over, and came puffing up to the bushes, and ran along these until he found what he was looking for. There was a huddled object on the ground, with the grass pressed flat underneath and sodden with blood. His first glance identified his victim. He shook his head, not believing his eyes. "What a hell of an outrage," he moaned bitterly. "And it had to be me that done it."

He raced through the bushes and dropped down beside the inert, sobbing creature. "Come on, Cigar Smoker," he said, with a choked feeling. "You just wasn't tryin', were you. You threw those shots wild because you didn't want to kill us. Whew, you're hurt bad—"

"Don't touch me," she begged. "I'm in such pain. Don't let them take me. I—I'm not the ambusher. I —Please help me, Dalton."

He wondered if he had heard aright. "You're not," he said, with disbelief in his voice. "Well, you're sure as hell in the ambusher's shoes; nobody would believe anything else."

"No," she said, without stirring. "It's Bartles. He made me come out here to guard the ridge. Last night he found the strong box. You must have reburied it when you found it while digging to cover up Hank. Bartles and my father told the old lady—they are the ones you want. I had to do what Bartles said. He would kill me if I didn't."

"Now wait a minute," he cautioned. "Let's get this straight—"

"Dad wrote a letter from prison to old Roberta who is supposed to be Helen's aunt, but isn't. He explained about how he'd buried the strong box out near the ridge and he wanted her to guard it till he got out of jail. That's why Bartles came out here and shot them; he was afraid they'd find the box. Dad also told her he was afraid old man Mackinson—Helen's father—had found out while he was delirious from a gunshot wound and Mackinson was doctoring him, where he had hidden the gold. He wasn't sure; he wanted all the Mackinsons killed. But I think they died without knowing anything about where the box was hidden, weren't even looking for it at first. But I can't talk any longer—I—"

Dalton quickly ripped away the girl's blue shirt and explored for the bloody wound, finding it above her left bare breast. He plugged it with a piece of linen from her underclothing and the bleeding stopped. She was feverish and more than half unconscious now.

"I swear to my maker—" she stammered "I swear to my God I've told you the—the truth. Don't let me die, Dalton—"

THEY WERE coming to the rendezvous now, and Dalton rode up to meet them. He led the posse out to where he had buried the box and they unearthed it. He told Helen to take care of the kid, that he didn't think the wound would be fatal but wasn't sure. He stopped at his horse and peered back at Helen's dirty face, and grinned.

"You didn't tell me your Aunt Roberta wasn't your real aunt—"

"I didn't think it made any difference," she stated. "Gosh, your face is dirty."

"Well, tell the Judge he's got to go there and stay with her because I presume he's the only man with the authority to keep her in custody. Helen—as much as I regret saying it—your Aunt Roberta and Bartles schemed up this whole thing. Bartles was the man who did the killing, or is the man, and your aunt put him up to it. She got a letter from Jennifer who smuggled it out of prison, I guess he smuggled it because all letters are read by the officials and he wouldn't have given away the fact that the box is hidden out here. But what did your aunt ever have to do with Jennifer?"

"She was once his sweetheart and

the only girl he ever loved, I've heard her say."

Judge Whorton bucked when Dalton told him to arrest Roberta, rubbing his red vest. "But she's a fine old woman and I ain't got the proof yet—"

Dalton roughly interposed. "You take my word for it. I can tell when I hear the truth. That kid doesn't know how bad she's hurt; she figgers it's a worse wound than it is. She wouldn't have lied facing her maker, if I know my women."

He loped back to where Helen was kneeling beside the girl and fanning her with her hat.

"Just one thing more, Carol," he said, "and mebbe we'll smoke those cigars after all. You said you didn't know where the box was till last night; how did you find out then?"

"Bartles found it," she said weakly. "He saw where you got the dirt to cover up Hank and he dug into it, and hit the box. He was suspicious of you all along."

"Sounds all right to me," Dalton said. He raced for Sullivan, landed in the leather and was away all in the same movement. Sullivan responded to his gentle urging. The horse was fast and cut the miles down in double quick time. He didn't want to run Sullivan the way he was compelled to do, but he wasn't taking any chances on Bartles getting away.

He reached town at dusk, and the watering trough gave him an idea. He left Sullivan there, with the reins free and walked over toward the stable; he was playing a hunch. There was nothing sure now. He had to play his hunches. The others would be coming in as soon as they could make it, but there was still quite a good while to wait. If Bartles was afraid of the results of sending the girl to guard the ridge, then he would be taking her place at the stable.

He was cautious and stopped in front of the big double door. He saw a cigarette burning back in the cool gloom of the areaway. "You in there, Bartles?" he asked. "I took you at your word. They said you'd be waiting here in Troy to see me. Are you ready now?"

"You talk too damned much," was Bartles' sullen answer. "If you're as game as you sound, come in and get me."

He heard the man scurry away. Lights came on behind Dalton and he knew Bartles could place him against these. He walked coolly away from the door. Moving inside the barn, Bartles struck something with his heavy body, and that collison was loud enough to be vibrant in the heavy stillness; but it did not break the tension. Other things immediately came to Dalton's hearing. Across the street an upstairs window was raised. The window grated against the tight casing. A man whispered something hoarsely into the night. People had begun to move along the board walks in the same block. There would soon be a group of spectators here, because it seemed to him that in a small trail town an impending gunfight can be sensed. He heard the water running from the iron pipe into the trough; it dripped melodiously. Inside the barn his ears caught the stamp of stalled horses. The sounds came through the wall and were magnified by Dalton's tensed mind. There was a suspiration of a gentle night wind through the cottonwoods lining the street. A deep voice said from deep within the barn: "Come on in, Dalton; I'm waiting." The breath clotted voice was grim.

DALTON HAD commenced his maneuvering. He knew the odds were with the man inside the barn and sheltered by its gloom.

"Come on in, Dalton," and then a thunderous calm prevailed. He eased around the door. He could see that glowing cigarette, and thought that Bartles was a fool for smoking in a situation like this. His coat sleeve scraped the wall, the cigarette disappeared.

"Where's your grain, Dalton," Bartles mocked.

Dalton's fist came from his holster at a sweep, touched the gun butt and swung it up. Bartles was moving,

but the man's wide torso cut a darker shadow against the gloom. It was like a black silhouette against a lamp-lit wall, a funny face you make with your fingers. On that grotesque outline Dalton pinned a still, motionless muzzle. One tremendous, exploding crack of sound overwhelmed Troy's half darkened streets and leaped away with an antelope's crazy speed, falling into lesser fragments.

Bartles was speaking, but Dalton had had the first word. His gun kicked back again, and all the fierce reverberations hammered up afresh. Powder smoke curled into Dalton's sweaty face. His antagonist came peculiarly out of his vantage point, staggered forward into the street lamp's reflections inside the barn. He was hit, but his gun rose again, and Dalton, pressing his will determinedly and brutally into the shot, fired once again on the plainer target. Bartles' head flew back, then it tipped down—abruptly down—and all his joints collapsed.

Dalton sagged back and fell outside the stable door. He felt that his chest had been caved in. He had seen walls of shale fall to pieces and crumple down in a heap. He imagined that when he raised his left hand to his ribs on his right side, they were like barrel staves and raw and bleeding.

SILHOUETTES were all around him now, flitting back and forth across the bracket lamps on the walls. A door was quietly closed somewhere near at hand. There was a drumming of running ponies that echoed crisply into the room. Somebody broke the spell by saying. "You're all right now, Dalton."

Helen Mackinson's brave, shapely shoulders were bent over him.

"You may sit up an hour today, the doctor said. But if you get weak, you are to lie back down immediately. I'm going after your dinner—baked potatoes and butter, and a hot biscuit. How does that sound?"

"Just a minute," he said. "I've been batting around in a half conscious stage three hours and I know of some things that have been said around me. But I don't know as much as I want to find out. I have been here six days. You said so yourself a while ago. Bartles is dead. Your aunt Roberta is dead, too. She beat you to it by shooting herself. The Judge was too slow; it was the best way out. The Wells Fargo is paying me a reward for finding the box. Carol Jennifer is recovering rapidly from her wound and is the patient in the next room that the doctor is attending. The kid had her chance to kill us and because she missed purposely we owe her more than we can pay. She told the truth.

"You found the letter Jennifer wrote Roberta asking her to arrange to have the Mackinsons killed or anyone else that went nosing out around the ridge. He wanted the box protected so that when he got out he could slide out again, with the gold. I know Bartles sent Carol out to scare off anyone that showed up, because he planned to get the box the same night. He had a buckboard hitched to a team in the barn and had hired a character in Troy to help him load it. Roberta did all she could for her old sweetheart, figgering he would split the boodle with her—which is doubtful. So the Mackinsons died because the first one, your father, happened to wander out to the ridge. I don't believe he knew about the box; it was just Jennifer's imagination. Then another Mackinson went exploring to find out why his father was killed, and so on down the line. Yes, I know those things, but—"

"Then," she said sweetly, "what else do you want to know?"

He sighed, chuckled and said, "Will you marry me?"

She did not answer for a moment. Then she said coyly, "Why doesn't the man who knows everything know the answer to his own question?" Then she added: "Of course, I couldn't do anything else ever in my life but love you, Dalton."

He sighed and—and—after that *and* he asked about Sullivan and learned that his horse was getting impatient to see him.

●

BOOTHILL

"We're sending you back to the Colonel, but the next jasper who jumps us swings."

"I've seen more than one situation like this, and it is no good at all. You may be strong now, Colonel, but you can't win in the end. Let me give you a piece of advice: your day, and the day of the open range, is over in the Indian Territory. You've made a good living; now sell out and live on your profits. Anyway, I won't do your killing for you; get some other gent for Boothill bait."

JIM LOCKRIDGE woke up in the Sharp's Ford jail with a black eye and numerous pains and abrasions. He had lost his hat in last night's fight, and Marshal Kilmer had taken the gun—but not until after one of Kilmer's deputies had slipped up behind Lockridge and laid a gunbarrel over his head.

Now in the middle of the next morning, Marshal Kilmer was coming back to Lockridge's cell in com-

BAIT

Feature Novel

by ALLAN K. ECHOLS

pany with a big man in tailored range clothes. The visitor had a cigar stuck in a red face, and he wore an air of authority as clearly stamped as that of a thoroughbred bull in a herd of scrubs. That gentleman would be Colonel Sharp, Lockridge decided as the men stopped before his cell.

Marshal Kilmer was also-clothes conscious; he wore a black broadcloth suit and white shirt with a black string tie. His gun rode high at his waist. "This is the man that wouldn't answer our questions, Colonel," he said, unlocking the cell. "He said you could answer for him."

The colonel removed his cigar from his mouth and asked, "What's your name?"

"Lockridge," Jim answered.

"He's all right," Colonel Sharp snapped. "Let him out."

Kilmer's manner became conciliatory. "Sorry, Colonel," he said, "but the man wouldn't tell me his business. He's got 'gun-hand' written all over him, and he's been hanging around the town all day yesterday. You said to pick up any

strangers that might be friends of Nixon."

"That's right," the colonel answered briefly. "But turn him loose; I sent for him."

Then he offered Lockridge an explantation. "You'll have to overlook this, Lockridge. There's trouble around here and I told Kilmer to check up on strangers that won't state their business."

Lockridge came out of his cell and followed the two men to Kilmer's pine desk. The officer dug his confiscated gun and belt out of a drawer and threw them on the desk top with a gesture of annoyance. "After this," he cautioned Lockridge, "answer my questions when I ask them."

Lockridge was perhaps short of thirty years of age. He was range-tanned, and the sun and wind had etched crinkles around the gray eyes which could grow as hard and cold as Polar ice. "You made a mistake taking my gun," he said quietly. "Hand it back to me."

Kilmer had a white face with black close-set eyes. The eyelids narrowed slightly. "There's your gun on the table. If you want it, take it."

Lockridge said, "Friend, you seem to like trouble."

His hand went out and his fingers slid into the throat of Kilmer's white silk shirt. Then his other hand slapped the officer resoundingly forehand and backhand across the cheek. His last blow was a solid punch with doubled fist. It knocked the marshal down on his back against the wall.

KILMER did not attempt to rise. Instead, he jerked his gun out of its holster. Lockridge was waiting for that move; he brought his boot heel down on Kilmer's wrist, pinning it to the floor just as Kilmer triggered the weapon. The explosion rocked the jail.

Kilmer's bullet knocked the heel off Colonel Sharp's shopmade boot. The colonel staggered and grabbed the edge of the desk to keep from falling.

Lockridge said to Kilmer, "Now drop your gun, and get up on your feet."

Kilmer had no choice in the matter. His hand released his gun and the weapon clattered to the floor. Lockridge kicked it out of reach. Kilmer got up, carefully dusting the dirt off his black suit with his two hands.

"Now hand me my gun," Lockridge repeated. He was standing near enough to the weapon on the table to grab it if Kilmer tried to make use of it.

Kilmer did not obey for a moment; his narrow eyes were hooded and venomous with a rage he feared to release. "Better do what he says, Kilmer," Colonel Sharp said disgustedly. "You took his gun away from him; hand it back to him. The man seems to be able to handle himself."

Kilmer's lips were tight, and his eyes did not meet those of Lockridge. Lockridge waited in a heavy silence. Kilmer finally lifted the gun belt carefully and extended it to Lockridge.

Lockridge strapped the weapon on, then he spoke to Kilmer. "The next time you try to arrest me, you'd better have a reason for it." Then he said to Sharp, "All right, Colonel, thanks for getting me out of this. Now, how about a bite of breakfast before we talk? The marshal don't provide meals for his guests."

The colonel had one foot lifted and was examining the damage to his boot. "Kilmer, you damned fool, you might have killed me," he swore angrily. "I'll have to stop by the saddlemaker's before I can walk to do any good."

Kilmer had slid into his chair back of his desk and was sullenly looking out the window. Colonel Sharp rested his hands on the desk facing him, and spoke sharply to him. "Kilmer, you'd better take it easy after this until you get in touch with me. I may have more men coming to see me, and I don't want them to have any trouble doing it. Understand?"

"Then why didn't you say so?" Kilmer answered angrily.

"Just don't do anything about anybody in any case until you've had

orders from me." The colonel turned his back on the officer and said, "Come on, Lockridge."

WHILE Colonel Sharp went into the saddlemaker's to get a new heel on his boot, Lockridge went into the general store and bought himself a new hat. Then while waiting for the colonel to get his boot-heel replaced, he stood on the sidewalk smoking and looking over the town.

Sharp's Ford sat on the side of the mountain which ran down to the Pushmoline River, a blue stream boiling down out of the Jackfork Mountains in the wildest and least settled part of Indian Territory.

Back of the town on the high side, the timbered mountain made a natural protective wall against the worst of the winter's winds, while on the low side, across the river on which Sharp's Ford sat, the land sloped downward to rolling prairie as far as the eye could see.

Coming up through the grazing land as he had approached the cow town yesterday, Lockridge had ridden through grass which was stirrup high to a man on horseback. He had stopped and looked at a dry gully, and in the cutbank he noted that the topsoil was black to a depth of from eight to ten feet above the clay sub-soil.

Seeing this coal-black land, Lockridge had already envisioned what would happen here. This country was opening up to white settlers by reason of the passage of a recent law allowing the Indians to sell their allotted land. Blackland would raise bumper corn crops for generations to come; there were already signs of the inroads of the farmers coming with plows to turn over this rich prairie sod and plant the fertile ground to crops. And when a farmer touches a plow to grazing land it is like touching a match to black powder; an explosion is inevitable.

Lockridge was standing waiting for Colonel Sharp and dwelling on the significance of these things when he saw a buckboard pull up before the general store. A girl was driving. She had the marks of the farmer rather than the rancher on her. The horses were work animals with the scars of trace chains on their legs, and the girl's clothes, though neat and clean, were those of a farm woman.

The horses were hard-mouthed, and shied from a seven-foot white cotton sack which hung flapping from the store awning. With nothing personal in intent, Lockridge stepped off the board porch and out to the hitchrack. He caught the horses by the reins and got them under control. The girl jumped out of the buggy as he took the tie-rope and tied the animals to the rail.

The girl looked at him queerly for a quick moment, and Lockridge thought he saw a touch of resentment in her eyes. He finished tying the animals, then stepped back onto the walk, tipped his hat and turned away from her.

She stood looking at him intently, and only turned her head away as he turned around and leaned his back against the store front. Finally she managed a brief, impersonal smile, and said, "Thanks."

Lockridge merely nodded and touched his hat again. The girl started across the walk to the store, but before she reached the door, it swung open and a big blond man came out, slamming the door behind him. Seeing the girl, the big man stopped still, blocking her path.

The big man did not tip his hat, but put his doubled fists on his hips and spoke to her. "Lady, you've got some cows on our grass. You'll have to get 'em off. You've been told about that before."

The girl's hair was so deep an auburn that it was almost red, Lockridge noted now, and her green eyes were sparkling with anger. "Are you talking to me?" she asked.

"Sure am, lady. I said to get your cows off our grass and keep 'em off."

"My cows are on open range," the girl answered. "That is not your land, and you have no more right on it than we have."

"You're wrong about that," the

man said. "Long S has been running stock on that grass for twenty years. If that's not reason enough, then get 'em off because I said so."

"I don't intend to move those cattle," the girl snapped, "and if anything happens to them, you'd better be ready to pay damages."

The big man laughed at the girl. "Got your share of spunk, ain't you, gal? Tell you what, maybe you and me could get together and work out some kind of arrangement that would satisfy us both."

This girl could ride with the best of them.

The big man put his own meaning on his statement with a suggestive smile. If he were aware that Lockridge was within hearing, he gave no sign of it. The girl saw his meaning, and her small firm hand darted out and slapped the man across the face.

"Now get out of my way," she said angrily.

The big blond man stood his ground. He rubbed his cheek and laughed at her again. "Now, listen, girl—" he started.

Then Lockridge was on him in three quick steps. He said coldly, "The lady said get out of her way. Step aside!"

THE BIG man turned his angry eyes on Lockridge and asked, "Just who the hell are you?"

Lockridge did not stop to answer. He cocked his fist, and when he hit the big square chin, his fist did not travel over twelve inches.

The blow caught the big man square on the button and knocked him over backward. He fell off the sidewalk and landed in the dust almost under the feet of the girl's team. The scattering of men on the street came quickly toward the scene of the trouble.

Lockridge waited for the big man to get up and go for his gun. The man got up, and stepped up onto the sidewalk, still somewhat dazed. Then he saw Lockridge waiting. He stood staring at him for a long moment while he tried to make up his mind whether to reach for his gun. Then gradually recognition came to his face.

"Lockridge!" he said. "The old star-toter."

"Yes. I'm Lockridge. But I'm no longer a Ranger, if you're interested. What about it? And do you still call yourself Swede Hensen?"

Hensen was taking noisy breaths through his thick nostrils. "You ain't drawing me into no fool play," he said. "I'm no professional gunman."

"I'll be around, Swede," Lockridge answered. "Maybe you'll get a shot at my back."

The big Swede busied himself dusting the dust off the seat of his pants. Colonel Sharp came through the crowd with his boot-heel repaired. He pushed toward the Swede, and asked, "What's the trouble, Hensen?"

"Nothing," the Swede grumbled. "Just this star-toter trying to build another notch on his gun; I'll see him later."

Colonel Sharp looked at Lockridge and then back to Hensen and said to the latter, "Go on and get your business done, and stop brawling on the street."

The Swede started to say something, but caught the look in the colonel's eyes, and turned without a word and walked down the street.

The colonel turned to Lockridge then, and asked, "Was my foreman making trouble for you?"

"Is that man your foreman?" Lockridge countered.

"Yes," the colonel said, "He's pretty rough, but he's just the kind of a man you'll need for the work I've got cut out for you. Ready to eat, now?"

2

THEY WENT into a restaurant to have breakfast, and after they had ordered, Lockridge asked, "Well, what's your proposition?"

Colonel Sharp said, "I talked to Meany and Clark, the commission men who sell my beef in Fort Worth. They tell me you are a man who can handle trouble."

"I've handled a little trouble now and then," Lockridge answered vaguely. "What's yours?"

"I'm being robbed. Nesters coming in and ruining the land, and robbing me blind. These nesters are dirt-poor, and they've got to eat. A big rancher's stock is fair game according to their minds, and so they eat my cattle and probably sell plenty of it, too. I want it stopped. It's just that simple, but I haven't been able to stop it."

"It will be hard to stop it as long as your cattle run loose where thieves can get their hands on 'em. You're pretty close to mountains, and that's always a tough nut to crack."

"Sure," Colonel Sharp answered. "So, there's only one way to crack it. Get rid of the nesters; that's your job."

"That girl that Hensen tangled with. Is she one of them?"

"Yes. And incidentally she's got a brother that's a pretty tough customer. They're farmers, but they've got a little herd of milking shorthorns, and they let them run loose. They get touchy if we drive them off our grass."

"I got the impression from the girl that their stuff was on open range."

The colonel snorted. "All right. It's unallotted tribal land. But I came here and started grazing this whole prairie twenty years ago. I built this town; it's mine by priority, and I claim it. That's enough, ain't it?"

"The girl didn't seem to think so," Lockridge answered quietly.

"It's your job to convince her and the rest of 'em. You can do that, can't you?"

"Why can't Hensen do it?" Lockridge countered.

"He'll help you, of course. He's got the guts, but he ain't got the brains. This fellow Nixon harps on legality all the time, so it will take more brains than Hensen has got to do the job and at the same time, keep your nose clean with the Commissioner of Indian Affairs."

"I heard your town marshal mention Nixon," Lockridge said. "Who is he, and where does he fit into the picture?"

"Carter Nixon came in here a few years ago, married an Indian woman and got hold of some land. You know how it is here; a white man can marry an Indian woman in a tribal ceremony and become an enrolled Indian, with all the privileges that go to the Choctaw tribe. Only costs fifty dollars, and legally you're as much Indian as a full-blood.

"Well, Nixon married this Indian woman, and took out a quarter-section allotment for himself alongside the land belonging to her and her family. His wife's father had three wives, all sisters, and between them they had about twenty-nine kids; every member of the family had his quarter-section of land the Government allotted them. Nixon bosses it all, with the approval of the Indian Agent. Counting the allotments of the old man and his three wives—all dead now—and the land allotted to the kids—dead and alive—Nixon married control of practically eight square miles of the best bottom land along the river. And the damned fool is trying to fence it!"

"What does he want to fence that much land for?"

"To keep my cattle under wire as he steals 'em, if you ask me! His excuse is that it's to keep my cattle out. What with stealing cattle from

me, and selling off land belonging to his Indian relatives, Carter Nixon is getting too big for his boots. He's got ambition to make this a farm country, and he's bringing in settlers. That just won't do. This is open-range cattle land, and them nesters is plowing up the best crop this country will ever raise—the grass. He's got to be stopped; that's what I'm hiring you to do."

"Is Nixon bringing these settlers in legally?" Lockridge asked.

"What's that got to do with it, man?" Sharp demanded, pounding the table angrily. "I'm hiring you to get rid of 'em. Do you drive those nesters out, or don't you?"

"I'm planning on looking things over," Lockridge answered. "But don't figure on me giving you an answer until I've made up my mind."

"Are you trying to say that you might not take the job?" Colonel Sharp asked impatiently. "I don't like hemming and hawing around; you either take a job or you don't."

"I haven't made up my mind yet."

"Well, make it up now! I've told you the facts. The pay is a hundred and fifty a month and keep, and full backing from me. Take it or leave it."

"If you must have the answer now," Lockridge said, "the answer is that I don't like the looks of it. I guess that means no."

Colonel Sharp eyed Lockridge across the table arrogantly. He was not accustomed to being crossed, and it went against his grain. "What's your objections?" he demanded.

"I've seen more than one situation like this," Lockridge answered gravely, "and it is no good at all. You may be strong now, Colonel, but you can't win in the end. Let me give you a piece of advice: your day, and the day of the open range, is over in the Indian Territory. You've made a good living; now sell out and live on your profits. Anyway, I won't do your killing for you; get some other gent for Boothill bait."

"Who do you think you're talking to, telling me what to do?"

Colonel Sharp pounded the table until the dishes rattled. He got to his feet angrily and took his hat off the nail on the wall, jamming it down on his head. Then he shook his thick finger at Lockridge.

"Those fools!" he said. "Meany and Clark said you were a man that knew the smell of gunpowder; you're nothing but a gutless bum. All right, I'm giving Kilmer orders that if you're not out of town in one hour, he's to throw you in jail and let you rot there. And I hope you're fool enough to resist arrest again. We don't need your kind around here."

"What's going to be your excuse for jailing me?" Lockridge answered easily.

"I don't want you around Sharp's Ford, and that's all the excuse I need."

The angry colonel slapped a dollar down on the table and strode out of the restaurant, heading across the street in the direction of the log jail.

LOCKRIDGE took his time about finishing his meal, and smoked a cigar at the table before he was ready to go. He had liked the looks of this new country better than any land he had seen in his years of wandering the cow trails from the Rio to Canada, and it made him sad to realize that it was facing the inevitable trouble that come to a land in the days of its transition.

This was of concern to him now. For something had been growing in Jim Lockridge during the short time he had been here. The country was beautiful and it was new, and he had been looking for just such a place where he could settle down and grow up with the country.

He had a growing conviction that he had at last found the place he had been looking for. He had spent the last five years with the Texas Rangers. But now he was tired of living by the gun, of fighting other men's

Lockridge opened up, even though the range was too great.

fights for them, and he longed for peace and a chance to build for himself. Now he had found it—and had found it hovering on the brink of bloodshed.

He had decided against going to work for Colonel Sharp as soon as he heard the colonel's plan, but he had probed the colonel for details for one reason; he had almost decided to stay here. And he knew that if he did stay here, instead of working for the colonel, he would have to be defending himself against this autocrat of the Pushmoline. It was better to find out as much about the enemy as possible while the enemy felt free to talk to him.

Lockridge got up from the table and paid his bill, and went out onto the street. He looked at the jail across the way, and saw Marshal Kilmer standing in its door lighting a long cigar and watching him. Colonel Sharp had just left him, and was walking up the street.

Lockridge stopped outside the restaurant and fished the makings out of his pockets. He fashioned a cigarette and lit it with an air of casualness which belied the alertness in him as he watched Colonel Sharp's town marshal.

Kilmer was a gunslick; the brand was all over him. Lockridge now understood why Kilmer wore a badge here. The reason was that he was simply a private enforcement officer for Colonel Sharp.

Kilmer got his cigar lit and started across the street at an easy pace. Lockridge noted the soft catlike tread of the man, and the actor's effort to appear disarmingly unready to go for his gun. Kilmer was like a panther stalking his prey.

Kilmer reached the edge of the board sidewalk in front of Lockridge. When he stopped there was less than ten feet separating the two men. Kilmer stood with both hands hanging easily at his sides, and with the cigar in the corner of his mouth, his head tilted so that the smoke curling upward from its tip would not get into his eyes. He casually looked up and down the street.

Lockridge also looked up and down the street, and knew what was on Kilmer's mind. Kilmer had set the stage for a grandstand play, and he was checking on two men—his deputies.

One of the deputies was leaning with his back against the wall of the Wykoff's Store across and slightly up the street. The other deputy was on the near side of the street, in front of the saddlemaker's shop. He was leaning against a stuffed horse on the sidewalk on which the saddlemaker had placed a new hand-stitched saddle for display.

The marshal and his two deputies had Lockridge hemmed in. Lockridge put his back to the wall this

time, remembering that his carelessness in not doing so last night had landed him in the jail. These men liked a rear attack.

KILMER took out his big gold watch with his left hand and clicked the case open. He looked at it, dropped it back into his pocket, then spoke to Lockridge. "Your time's about up," he said softly. "Are you fixing to ride?"

"Yes, I was just fixing to ride," Lockridge answered. He noted the faint show of surprise on the officer's face.

"That's a bright idea," Kilmer said. "It's a good thing you've got sense enough to get out of town and stay out."

"Now you've jumped at a conclusion and missed your footing," Lockridge answered. "I said I was riding, but I didn't say I was going to leave town. As a matter of fact, the more I see of it, the better I like it. Get rid of some of the nits and lice around here and it would be a fit place for a man to live."

"It's not fit for you," Kilmer answered, "unless you want to sleep your time out under them oaks in the graveyard."

"Well, now, that settles it," Lockridge answered. "I'm getting on in years, and I've never been driven out of a place yet that I wanted to stay in. So, I'll be around for awhile. Does that suit you and the colonel?"

"It does not suit me at all," Kilmer answered. "I'm getting along in years, myself, and when I tell a man to do something, he does it. The day you set foot in this town again will be your burying day."

"In that case," Lockridge answered softly, "you might just as well start your work."

"Are you resisting arrest?"

"Call it what you want to," Lockridge answered. "I told you once today that you'd better have a mighty good reason, if you ever tried to lay hands on me again."

Lockridge had seen the deputy across the street start walking toward him. And seeing that, Lockridge moved his position a little so that he could keep both Kilmer and that deputy within sight without shifting his gaze.

That left the man down the street by the stuffed horse. But there was no way Lockridge could also get him into his line of vision without losing sight of Kilmer and the deputy converging on him. That was bad business, but there was nothing he could do about it until the shooting started.

He had frozen into a position of alertness now. His cigarette had dropped from his hand and he was tense, knowing that the first move from himself or Kilmer would start the battle.

Then, with his eyes glued on his enemies, he heard a voice at his side. He did not look around, but he recognized the voice of the girl with auburn hair. Then the girl moved and deliberately stood in a direct line between him and Kilmer. She was facing Lockridge, and her arms were loaded with bundles.

"I beg your pardon," she said. "But you were kind enough to handle my team for me a while ago. I wonder if I could impose on you again? If it wouldn't be too much trouble, I would be very grateful to you if you would help me get my rig out of town and started home. The team is so big that they're hard for me to handle."

LOCKRIDGE looked at the approaching deputy who had now stepped up onto the sidewalk. He saw that man look inquiringly at Kilmer. He moved aside slightly so that he could see Kilmer standing beyond the girl.

He saw the officer's mouth drawn tight, and noted the gunman's angry heavy breathing by the rise and fall of the bosom of his white shirt. He took a quick look down toward the stuffed horse and saw that puzzled deputy step out from behind his fortress and come walking toward Kilmer, a puzzled expression on his face.

Then Lockridge looked at the girl, and saw that she had turned her head and was surveying Kilmer with a

look of cold contempt on her face. And when Lockridge saw that, he understood. The girl had deliberately broken up this gunplay for some reason connected with Kilmer. She had placed herself between Kilmer and Lockridge so that Kilmer could not possibly shoot him.

Puzzled and slightly angry, he turned his attention back to the girl, and there was a dry smile on his lips as he said, "Why, of course, Miss. Right away?"

"Yes, if you please. And would you mind helping me with these bundles?"

She held out a large package and placed it in his hands. "Thanks," she said. "The buckboard is across the street where I left it."

Lockridge gave a glance at Kilmer, and the look of frustration on the officer's face made Lockridge laugh. "What's the matter, Kilmer? Are you squeamish about shooting women in the back in broad daylight?"

Kilmer ignored the thrust and turned his attention to the girl. He lifted his hat and bowed. Then he replaced his hat and said, "Miss Keenan, you are interfering with the law."

"I don't see anybody around here but a few of Colonel Sharp's pet jackals," the girl answered.

Then turning back to Lockridge, she asked, "Are you ready?"

Lockridge grinned at Kilmer. "I'll see you later," he promised, and turned and walked with the girl down to the buckboard.

3

LOCKRIDGE untied the team from the hitchrail and handed the girl into the vehicle. He stood beside it, feeling a sudden desire not to leave her. "I don't think you were so terribly worried about being able to handle these horses, were you?" he asked.

She saw the amusement in his eyes and returned it, and her smile was like a warm drink to him. "I've been driving these horses for five years," she answered, "and they haven't got away from me yet."

"I didn't think you were afraid of them," Lockridge said. "So what made you break up Kilmer's little party? He was getting ready to arrest me."

"He was getting ready to kill you," the girl returned. "And besides, I owed you a favor, didn't I?"

Lockridge answered, "The man needs killing, and I might have rid the country of a gold-plated coyote."

"He's all of that," the girl agreed, "but if you'd killed him, Colonel Sharp would have sent other men after you. When you whipped his foreman on my account, you earned his hatred and my obligation."

"You put yourself in danger," Lockridge protested. "Bullets would have been flying in a minute."

"I wasn't in danger," the girl laughed. "Kilmer is a gunman, but vanity oozed out the pores of his skin. He wouldn't be seen with dirty fingernails, and he will bump his head on the sidewalk bowing to any white woman with a clean dress on. But aside from those two questionable virtues, I wouldn't put anything past him."

"You sound as though you know what you are talking about."

"I do, and so does everybody around Nixon's School."

"Nixon," Lockridge repeated. "I keep hearing that name. Who is the gentleman?"

"He's my uncle; he farms down the river about ten miles."

"Now that's a coincidence" he said. "I was just going to ride out to see Mr. Nixon. And since you mentioned being afraid to drive the team, I'd be glad to drive your buckboard out for you and lead my horse. I can probably handle your team, as wild as it is."

"You know you don't have to help me handle my team," she said with a laughing protest.

"Well, it's as good an excuse to ride with you as any," he insisted.

"Anyway, I'm going your way, so we might as well be getting acquainted. I might be a neighbor of yours some of these days."

The girl had to laugh again. "My name is Ruth Keenan."

"My name is Jim Lockridge, and I came all the way from Texas just to meet you. You've been expecting me, haven't you?"

She looked at his big new fawn-colored Stetson and shook her head. She said, "Once a cowboy, always a lady-killer. Why is it that the minute a man puts on a hat with an eight-inch brim, he gets the idea that the women are all lined up waiting for a smile from him?"

"Do you seriously think every man in a big hat is a lady-killer?"

"I seriously think that *he* thinks he is," the girl answered. "I've seen enough of Colonel Sharp's riders to convince me of that. They seem to think their Stetsons have some magic influence on a woman's mind."

JIM LOCKRIDGE took off the new fifteen-dollar Stetson he had just bought, gave it one look, and then taking it by the brim he threw it sailing across the street into a clump of broomweeds.

Then he climbed into the buckboard beside the girl and drove down to the liverystable where he picked up his horse and, leading the animal by its tie rope, drove the buckboard down the road toward the river.

The girl sat beside him in silence for a while, wrapped in her own thoughts. He had quit talking when they left the liverystable. It was dawning on him now that he was riding into the heart of the trouble, lured there by two separate things, something about the land and something about the girl with auburn hair. They both drew him on...

Colonel Sharp had told him that Carter Nixon was a crook, systematically stealing the land belonging to the family of Indians he had married into, and preying on Colonel Sharp's Long S Brand cattle. It was also Nixon who was selling this land to the nesters.

And the girl had said that Carter Nixon was her uncle. For a man who wanted to settle down and leave trouble behind him, Jim Lockridge was riding in the wrong direction.

"Tell me," he queried after a while. "I understand that your uncle has farmland to sell. Is that his regular line of business?"

"No," the girl answered. "He farms the land belonging to himself and his wife, and he spends the rest of the time trying to help his neighbors. That includes trying to teach the Indians the best way to escape their poverty, it includes doctoring the sick and—oh—anything that will help people."

"You seem to admire your uncle a right smart."

"Nobody that knew him could feel any other way about him," the girl answered firmly.

"I take it, then, that Colonel Sharp doesn't know him."

"Colonel Sharp doesn't want to know him," the girl answered vehemently. "Colonel Sharp hates him because he is helping the Indians protect their rights in their land. He wants it left open for his cattle to graze. That's why that big Swede was so insulting to me this morning. That and—" her voice trailed off, and she left the thought unstated.

"That, and the fact that any man in a big hat thinks he's a lady killer," Lockridge laughed.

"Well, you didn't lose any time convincing yourself that I wanted you to ride with me."

Jim Lockridge recognized a strong current of something underneath the light tone of her voice. She spoke seriously, and Lockridge got the feeling that she believed what she had said, and was disappointed with him because of it. He dropped his own bantering tone.

"Then you completely misunderstood me," he said. "There could be another reason why I was so eager not to lose sight of you. I've never before seen a girl that I wanted to keep on seeing, and so I don't know anything about this flirtation business. When I saw you, I knew for the first time in my life that I had seen a girl I couldn't forget. And because I didn't want that experience to pass in and out of my life like a face in a window of a passing train, I did the only thing I could do to get to see more of you. The answer is just that simple. If it offends you, I'll stop the buggy and get on my horse and go away."

The girl bit her lip. "I'm sorry," she said simply. "It's just that I've had such unpleasant experiences with these Long S men that I suppose I took all cowboys to be like them. And—well—you were with Colonel Sharp this morning, and so I naturally took it that you were one of his men—at least until you had your trouble with Hensen. I thought perhaps I got you fired—that is, that maybe you got fired or something because you helped me. You're not a Sharp man, are you?"

The last question was direct, and she looked to him for an answer. "No, I am not a Sharp man. Why?"

"Well," she said with a touch of indecision. "You see, Colonel Sharp has threatened to burn our homes down and drive us out of the country if Uncle Carter goes on and fences our property like we plan to do. We are not fighting people. In our little community there are just a few white farmers and some Indians, and I'm afraid we won't stand much of a chance against Colonel Sharp and his hired gun hands. I was just hoping that maybe if you weren't a Sharp man, maybe we could hire you to help us. You look like a fighting man."

LOCKRIDGE felt a quick annoyance with the girl, and a sudden flood of disappointment. He laughed at himself; he had let his own feelings for the girl lead him to believe that perhaps she liked him. Now he knew why she was interested in him. "To tell you the truth," he said, "I'm not much interested in landing a gun job right at present. Right now I'm satisfied to let other people settle their own troubles. If your uncle can't face Colonel Sharp, why doesn't he move out? There's other land."

"Wouldn't it be cowardly to run?" the girl asked, and looked squarely at him.

He gave this a moment's thought, and then said, "Courage can be a mighty expensive luxury sometimes."

"Yes," the girl answered. "But it's the only luxury poor people can afford."

"Possibly," Lockridge agreed, "but I haven't noticed any great number of poor people who thought they could afford it."

"That's because they did not have a man like Uncle Carter to inspire them," the girl said simply. "Well, here is Nixon's School, and there's my Uncle Carter. You wanted to see him."

"Yes," Lockridge answered. "And now, more than ever."

FROM TIME to time as they had driven along the riverside, Lockridge had examined the land and the few cabins in small fenced patches. Here and there he had seen an Indian or two, and on other farmsteads, white families working crops of corn, cotton and head grain. While the cabins were rude and poor, the places seemed well-tended. The furrows of the row crops were straight and clean of weeds. All this suggested poor, but hard-working and ambitious people.

Now the buggy had stopped at a clearing under a scattering of great oaks and cottonwoods, where a gabled building of pine poles, chinked

with clay, was the center of the activity of a group of Indians and white men who were loading newly-cut fence posts on wagons from a long pile of posts stacked like cordwood.

Lockridge also saw something else that quickly caught his eye. A bunch of rifles were stacked up against a sawhorse, and a few old pistols lay on an upended wooden crackerbox near the stack of posts.

A man separated himself from the group and came toward the buckboard. "That's Uncle Carter," the girl said.

Lockridge was watching the approaching man, who had dropped the axe with which he had been splitting the oak logs being cut into posts.

Carter Nixon was at least six inches more than six feet in height, and fence-rail thin. He was slightly stooped, and walked with long gangling strides, his unusually long arms swinging freely as he moved.

When the man reached the buckboard, Lockridge saw that his black hair was streaked with gray, and so thick that it stood upward in an unruly mass. His face was lean and boney, with deep seams. The cheekbones were high, and the black eyes deepset, and somehow sad, as though he looked out upon a world in which he saw little to be happy about. And yet the sadness did not denote weakness, but added somehow to the impression Lockridge got of an extraordinary amount of reserve strength.

Altogether, Carter Nixon was an ungainly and homely man, but there was a deeper quality in him that somehow conveyed that the surface appearance of placidity covered a man of fire.

THE GIRL introduced them, and when they shook hands, Lockridge noted that Nixon was reserved, and was giving him a searching study with his deep-set eyes.

The girl said, "Mr. Lockridge wanted to see you."

Lockridge added, "Yes, I've been looking at this land, and it interests me. Good farming land. I'm interested in buying a piece of it, if you've got anything that suits me."

Carter Nixon rubbed his lean jaw. "We've got the land, and ordinarily we would be mighty glad to sell it," he said. "But right now conditions are such that I wouldn't care to sell. Maybe later. Sorry."

Lockridge hid his surprise, but asked, "Would you mind saying why you wouldn't like to sell?"

"Well," Nixon replied vaguely, "Things are somewhat upset at present, and it wouldn't be fair to allow a person to buy land that perhaps he wouldn't be able to hold. Later, after it quiets down, I'd be more than glad to sell."

A sudden idea struck Lockridge. "I've heard a little about the trouble you're having," he said. "If you have any idea that I'm a Sharp man, you can forget it. I've just had some words with that gentleman, myself; I'm not lined up with him."

The girl apparently suspected that some such suspicion was running in her uncle's mind, for she confirmed Lockridge's statement. "Mr. Lockridge had to knock Colonel Sharp's foreman down for being rude to me" she explained. "And the marshal tried to draw him into a gun battle. I know that he's no friend of Long S."

Carter Nixon was thoughtful a moment. "Still, I take it that you're primarily a cattleman," he said. "I doubt if our little farming community would suit you."

"Look," Lockridge answered. "Why don't you let me be the judge of that? It's my money and my time I'd be risking, and it just happens that I want to buy a farm and raise stock and feed under wire. You've got land to sell, and I want to buy it. What can be your objection?"

"We're just a bunch of farmers," he said, "and ordinarily we don't have trouble. You wear a gun, and I've noted that people don't usually wear guns unless they have some use for them. I don't think you'd find much use for your weapon here under ordinary circumstances."

"In short," Lockridge answered.

Another of the invaders went down.

"You take it I'm a gunman, and you don't want a professional gunhand to settle among you. Maybe I'd better explain. I'm a former Texas Ranger. After I left the Rangers to work for myself, I worked a while as a private range detective on my own. But I am sick of trouble, myself, even other people's troubles, and so I want to hang up my gun and go to raising stock. That should answer your objections."

"I see," Carter Nixon answered. "That does answer one of the objections I had in mind. But in that case, there's the other objection which should be the deciding point, in the light of the fact that you're looking for peace. You see, we're in serious trouble here right now. We're on the verge of being driven out of here. We're going to defend ourselves, but actually, we have little chance of survival. So, you see I could not honestly sell you a piece of land knowing that it might be worthless to you even in a matter of a few days or even less. We need the money badly, and we need all the help we can get. But it would not be fair to drag you into our troubles. That would be no less than fraud, to my way of thinking."

LOCKRIDGE searched his mind for another approach. "This is a disappointment to me," he said simply. "I like the looks of this country, and I want to settle here and help make something out of it. But I see your point of view, and I respect you for it. Now, let me make you another proposition. Let me work around with your men while this trouble is brewing, and see how it goes. If it gets too hot for me, I'll take out. On the other hand, after the trouble is over, then you can sell me the land if you want to. That relieves you of any obligation to keep me out of trouble, but if I can handle my end of it, I believe that you'll agree that I've earned the right to buy the land."

Carter Nixon thought this over, then gave his opinion. "That sounds fair enough to me," he said. "So long as you know what you're getting into, then you're welcome to join us. You're welcome to be a guest at my house as long as you're here."

Lockridge thanked him and added, "In that case, while I'm here, just consider me like the rest of you. I'll help you work, and I don't expect to be left out of your trouble. As I said, I've had some experience with a gun, and it may come in handy."

"On those terms, we could use your help," the old man answered gravely.

The girl spoke up. "I've got to run along. Got some medicine to take to some sick children, and other things to do. And thanks, Mr. Lockridge, for helping me with the team." There was a mischievous twinkle in her eye as she said this.

"Glad to handle them for you any time," Lockridge smiled back at her. "And I hope you'll need some more help right soon."

She got into the buckboard and drove off, and Lockridge said to Nixon, "Now, how about me giving a hand with the fencing?"

They walked together toward the stack of fence posts, where a wagon had been loaded and was about to pull out.

Nixon said, "We're setting posts around as much of our entire holdings as we can. We've got about eight sections of grass here, counting everybody's land, and we have to save that grass for hay. Colonel Sharp's cattle had rather graze on our land than the open range back of it because ours is nearer to water.

That is the cause of our trouble with Colonel Sharp. He doesn't want us to keep his cattle off our grass."

"I don't see any wire," Lockridge observed. "And those posts are too short to use on rail fences."

"No, we have no wire," Carter Nixon admitted. "We just haven't got the money yet to buy the wire we need. So we can only put up the posts now, and buy the wire as we can."

"But if you had sold me a half section, you would have had enough money to buy that wire, wouldn't you?"

"Yes," Carter Nixon admitted. "But the fact that we need the wire is no excuse for having sold you land you can't hold."

Hearing this example of an honestly so rugged that he had rarely seen the like, Lockridge began to understand how it was that the girl felt so strongly about this lean and homely old man.

As they reached the wagonload of posts, a man rode up through the woods on a sweating horse, slid to the ground and delivered his message to Nixon in an excited voice.

"They stopped us setting them posts," he said, breathlessly. "Drove us off. What do we do?"

"Who drove you off?" Nixon asked.

"That big tow-headed Swede and his riders. Four of 'em were just passing on their way from town. They saw us, and came over to where we were working. They told us that we couldn't finish our jobs. Our rifles were back in the wagon, and those men were armed, so there was nothing we could do but quit digging. The boys sent me back to find out what you thought ought to be done."

"Are they staying around to see that you don't go back to your work?"

"No, they rode on off toward the Long S house, but Hensen said if he saw us working again, he'd come out and stop us for keeps. What do you want the boys to do?"

"We will keep on fencing." Nixon answered without excitement. "I will go with you."

4

LOCKRIDGE got his horse and rode with Nixon and the other man out to the prairie. The fencing crew had already set about half a mile of posts in a straight line paralleling the river. There were eight men here sitting in the scant shade of one of the log wagons, waiting word from Nixon.

Nixon introduced Lockridge to them as a group, and repeated Lockridge's explanation of his presence. Then, after a few words, he said, "We will go back to work, but keep our guns close to us."

Lockridge picked up one of the half-dozen pairs of post hole diggers and joined them as they stretched out past the line of posts already set. Each man measured off three long paces from the next man to him, and set about the slow, hot task of digging the holes a foot and a half deep in the baked black earth.

As the holes were dug, others brought posts and dropped them into the holes, shoving the removed dirt back around the posts with their feet, inverting the diggers, and tamping the dirt down with the handles. It was slow, hard work, but the line of posts gradually marched across the waist-high grass. It would take twenty-four miles of barbed wire to enclose the two two-mile sides and the one four-mile side of this block with the three-strand fence needed to keep the Long S cattle off the farmers' graze.

They had been working steadily for three hours without interruption when one of the men called out, "There's Hensen coming back."

There were six horsemen coming over a rise about a mile distant. Nixon explained, "Long S has its houses in a woods at the top of that last rise. With a pair of field glasses, they could have seen us working."

"I think I see now," Lockridge said, "why Sharp doesn't want you to fence this block. If you do, you will close off four miles of the river front."

"That is true," Nixon said. "As things are now, his stock grazes on our grass to be near water. When our fences are up, they will have to go a long distance to get a drink. Sharp could build ponds for them, of course. But that would cost him money. So he prefers to drive us off the river front."

The old man laid his post hole diggers down and went to his horse and got his rifle from his saddle boot. Then bringing it with him, he picked up his diggers and went on with his work. That was his answer to his friends, and seeing him take the lead, they went after their own rifles, and then came back and continued their work.

Lockridge had removed his gun belt to rid himself of its unnecessary weight while he worked. Now he got the weapon off his saddle horn and strapped it around his waist. He spoke to Nixon.

"Hensen is a man I've had trouble with before. He's a fugitive from justice down in Texas, and he knows I know it. I'm not a man to interfere with his business so long as he behaves himself, but the chances are that when he sees me with you, he will center his attention on me. He'd like to know that I wasn't around to send word back to Texas about him. So, whatever you plan to do, give me some time with Hensen first. It might save some bloodshed."

"It's our trouble, not yours," Nixon answered. "But if you think you can save bloodshed, then you talk to him."

The riders had disappeared in a hollow, but now came up over a closer rise, and were within rifle range. Lockridge laid his post hole diggers down. The others had quit their work and were coming up, grouping around Nixon.

Lockridge said, "Staying bunched up is the best way in the world to get killed. You men take your guns and scatter. Just drop down in the grass and keep crawling until you're well separated. I'll be right here. Kind of make a half-circle in the grass around back of me. You'll be hard to hit, hiding in the grass, and there's no sense in your taking more risk than you need to."

"He's right," Nixon said. "Just he and I will face them. The rest of you take your places and keep your rifles on them while we talk to them."

THE MEN scattered and dropped down to their hands and knees in grass so high that their bodies could not be seen when they were in this position. They started crawling to their locations. Their movements bent the grass over temporarily, but they were practically invisible as targets for the oncoming riders.

The oncoming riders now closed the distance, speeding their horses up to a run, and spreading out fanwise as they came up. In the center of the fan was Swede Hensen, big and dominant on his black horse.

Lockridge walked toward him as he and his men pulled their horses to a stop. Nixon walked at Lockridge's left side.

Hensen raised his hand in a signal to his riders, at the same time pulling his horse to a sliding stop within about thirty feet of Lockridge and Nixon.

Lockridge looked the men over carefully. He saw that besides their handguns, they had rifles in their saddleboots. They had come out for blood this time.

Hensen had apparently worked himself up into the angry mood as he rode, for he was already at a high pitch, and he immediately barked an order. "You two, there! You've had your warning! Now turn around and get your hands into the air."

Lockridge kept walking toward Hensen, with Nixon coming along. And now he was within twenty feet of Hensen before Hensen recognized him. Sight of Lockridge brought a triumphant smile to Hensen's face. "Oh, so you've taken up with the nesters, have you? Well, you're just in time to hang with them. Get your

hands up and turn around!"

"Hang, no less?" Lockridge repeated.

"I want no words with you, Lockridge," Hensen answered. "This whole tribe has been eating Long S beef for a long time. And now they're building a big corral to hold it till they can sell some of it. We've reached the end of our patience."

"So have I," Lockridge answered. "My friends here tell me that you've been trying to drive them out for a long time. I'm one of this bunch now, and so you can start with me. Come and get me—or ride out and don't show up along this fence line again!"

The man next to Hensen, said, "Will you listen to that? He's telling us what to do. What are we waiting for?"

"Let me tell you what he's waiting for," Lockridge answered. "He's trying to figure out what chance he's got of getting me killed without getting a slug in his brisket first. He knows I can get my gun out and put three bullets in him before his gun leaves leather."

One of Hensen's men down the line spoke. "Well, Swede, what did we come out here for?"

Lockridge said, "I could answer that one too, mister—"

HE NEVER finished that statement, for he saw a movement out of the corner of his eye. One of Hensen's men at the other end of the line took the moment when Lockridge's eyes had gone to the speaker, and tried for a sneak shot.

The old instinct, born of long training in the face of such dangers, came to Lockridge, and his hand streaked down to his weapon while he spun on his heel to face the sneak gunner.

The man's gun came out first, because of his earlier preparation for the move, but Lockridge had jumped as he turned, and the horseman's bullet whistled by him.

Lockridge's weapon spoke only a fraction of a second after that of the sneak, but its bullet went true. The force of his slug knocked the man off his horse. The man fell in the

There was a slim chance of being in time.

grass. The horse lit out for the river bottom at a run.

Lockridge spun back toward Hensen. Hensen was trying to draw his gun and at the same time spur his horse into a lope, and turn him as he went.

Lockridge could have shot him dead before his gun cleared leather, but instead he sent a bullet whizzing by the nose of Hensen's horse. The whining bullet sent the animal into a panic and he reared up on his hind legs and spun around. Hensen had to drop his gun back into his pouch and handle the reins with both hands in getting the animal under control.

Lockridge saw the whole bunch of Hensen's men take out after their leader, and he wondered about why it was—until he looked around. Then he saw that every one of Nixon's friends had refused to stay hidden in the grass, but had stood up with their rifles in their arms, presenting a circle of guns covering the horsemen.

Lockridge stood with Nixon beside him and with the circle of fence builders behind him while he saw the whole of the Long S crew ride out of range, leaving their one member lying dead in the grass.

"I expect they would have killed us," Nixon said gravely. "It looks as though they've decided to have their showdown."

"They can't afford to back up now," Lockridge agreed.

"I know that. And neither can we. I only wish we could buy the wire and go on with it."

Lockridge said, "I'm the one that killed that man, and for that, Long S will be after me. As far as they're concerned, I'm one of you now. That's right, isn't it?"

"Yes, that's true."

"Then we'll be fighting together from here on out until it is settled. I see now how things are, and I still want land here. We'd be in a better position if we went on building this fence, just as you admitted. So, how about this? Lend me a wagon and a man to help, and I'll go to town and buy the wire and staples we need. After the trouble is settled, you can deduct the price of the wire from what I will owe you for the land. That will help us all."

Carter Nixon gave this some thought before answering. Then he said, "Well, since you are already in the fight, and see what you're up against, I don't see why we couldn't accept your offer to furnish the wire in exchange for part of the land you want to buy. But I don't think your offer will help us much. You see, I doubt if the store will sell us the wire. Wykoff, the owner of the store, is another of those people in town who are afraid of Colonel Sharp."

"He's got wire to sell, hasn't he?"

"Yes."

"Then maybe I can persuade him to sell it to us. I'll hit for town in the morning, and we'll see."

LOCKRIDGE SLEPT in the barn back of the rambling old log house in which Nixon lived with a dozen or so of his Indian people. After breakfast Nixon took him out to the horse lot and found him a good work team. While they were harnessing the horses to the wagon, a young red-headed man came up and joined them. Nixon introduced them.

"This is Jim Lockridge," Nixon said. "Dill Keenan. I asked him to go along with you after the wire. He's single, and I don't think he will lose his nerve if you get into trouble."

Lockridge shook hands with Ruth Keenan's young brother, and liked him at first sight. Young Keenan was a husky six-footer, and his hands showed the calluses of hard work. He had the same forthright look in his eyes that Lockridge had seen in his sister, and he was not inclined to talk too much.

They harnessed up and reached town in a couple of hours, driving the wagon up the alley back of Wykoff's store and stopping at the loading dock alongside the warehouse. As they got out of the wagon, Lockridge looked into the open door of the warehouse and saw a big pile of spools of barbed wire among the stacks of plow tools and other equipment.

"They've got a carload of the stuff," Keenan said.

"Yes, and we'll get our share," Lockridge answered. "You stay here and watch the wagon."

Lockridge went on into the store by the back way, and saw a fenced-in corner office where a small gray man sat at a pine table which served him as a desk. He threaded his way through an aisle lined with nail kegs, horse-shoe keys, axe handles, picks and racks of harness and leather goods, and came to the office rail. Coming around a high stack of salt blocks, Lockridge did not see the other man approaching Asa Wykoff, the proprietor.

The other man, approaching from the front entrance, was Swede Hensen.

Lockridge had reached the office railing when Hensen saw him and stopped in his tracks half a dozen feet away. Lockridge turned and looked at him, and caught the look of unconcealed hatred on Hensen's face. Keeping his eyes carefully on the man, he backed away from the rail a step, and waited.

He saw the rage mounting in Hensen; it showed in the sudden flush of blood to his face, and in his eyes, which seemed to suddenly lose the light of reason. Hensen's hand started impulsively toward his gun, then Hensen's bitter memory of Lockridge's speed held it in check, and the hand fell to his side.

Lockridge waited for the play

until he saw that Hensen had decided against going for his gun. Lockridge slid over to the office rail, still facing Hensen. With his eyes on the Long S foreman, he spoke to the little gray man who had got out of his chair and was standing looking at him over the rims of his spectacles.

"I want thirty-two spools of barbed wire and a keg of fencing staples," Lockridge said. "Just tell me how much that will be and I will pay you. We'll load it out, ourselves."

The old man glanced at Hensen and back at Lockridge, and his voice was a hesitant "H-m-m, I don't know." He looked at Hensen again.

IT WAS evident to Lockridge that the old man, having seen the bit of by-play between him and Hensen, was squirming around for some sign from Hensen as to what he should do. Hensen supplied him with his clue.

"I was just coming in to buy wire," he said. "All you've got. You remember Colonel Sharp saying to save it for him. Well, he wouldn't want you to let anybody else have it after you'd promised it to him."

The storekeeper nodded his head jerkily. "I see," he said. "Yes, I remember now." He turned to Lockridge with a cold smile. "Sorry," he said. "That wire is all promised."

"Let me tell you something, friend," Lockridge answered. He leaned over the rail and caught the old man by his shirt front and shook him. "Hensen is lying about Sharp wanting that wire. Sharp never told you to save it for him, so you're going to sell it to me!"

The man jerked away from Lockridge angrily. His voice was a high-pitched angry chirp. "Take your hands off me, sir. You just heard Mr. Hensen tell me that Colonel Sharp wanted it."

"And I just heard Hensen lie to you on the spur of the moment when he heard me order it. Now, if you want to hear Hensen cancel that order just stick around a minute."

Lockridge was good and angry now as he whirled and faced Hensen. "You'd better straighten Wykoff out on that business before I take it out of your hide. Tell him you lied about it."

"I'm not telling Wykoff any such thing, Lockridge," he said. "But I'll tell you something. You ain't toting a star now, and so you're not getting away with a thing on me, any more."

Lockridge did not wait to hear more. He made a sudden dive for Hensen, and had his arms around the big Swede's waist before Hensen knew what was happening. He jerked Hensen's gun from its holster and threw it sailing across the store. It crashed through the glass of a candy showcase and came to rest on a bowl of red gumdrops.

He stepped back from Hensen just as the big Swede's fist came down across his face, jolting him to his feet. Then Hensen came in with a roar like a charging animal, while Lockridge smothered the flying fists with elbows and forearms.

Hensen stopped suddenly and kicked at Lockridge, catching him in the belly with the sharp toe of his massive boot. Lockridge went backward and hit the floor with the wind knocked out of him.

Hensen rushed in on him and began kicking him in the ribs. Lockridge rolled over, trying to avoid the punishing blows to his ribs, and Hensen followed him up, intent on destroying him completely.

Lockridge rolled under a table of display dinnerware, avoiding Hensen's feet for a moment while he tried to lift himself upright again.

He pulled himself to his feet with the edge of the table, and stood behind it while he tried to regain his breath that Hensen's kicking had driven from his lungs.

Hensen would give him no time to recover, and came at him. Then as only the table separated them, Hensen caught the table's edge and lifted it upward, turning it over toward Lockridge. The display dishes slid crashing to the floor in a loud rattle as the table went over. Then Hensen was on Lockridge again.

The sheer weight of Hensen's

huge body drove Lockridge back against a nail keg containing new axe handles. Hensen lowered his head and ran toward Lockridge with the intention of using his skull for a battering ram.

Lockridge jerked one of the bright new axe handles out of the keg, and as Hensen came within reach, Lockridge brought it down on the man's head.

The axe handle caught Hensen on the side of the skull, laying his scalp open, then slid down over his ear and ripped it half off.

Blood gushed from Hensen's scalp and ear. The jolt of the blow stunned him, and he stood frozen in his peculiar bent-over position.

Lockridge lashed back and forth with the axe handle again, catching Hensen on the right side of the head and on the left, knocking it from side to side. Then he swept the weapon upward and the blow lifted Hensen's head so that he was standing upright, dazed and bleeding.

The solid contact of the axe handle had knocked all the fight out of him.

Lockridge was on him instantly. He got his left hand in Hensen's collar, and said, "Now come over here and talk to the man!"

HENSEN, IN his dazed condition, had no choice. Lockridge led him by the collar to the rail of the office.

"Now tell Wykoff that you were wrong about Sharp having wanted that wire."

"Let the man have the wire if he wants it," Hensen growled. "It won't do him no good, anyway. The colonel is here swearing out a murder warrant against him now."

The little gray storekeeper shrugged. He was hardly listening, but with his mouth puckered as though he had been eating green persimmons, he was surveying the wreckage of his store.

Lockridge turned Hensen loose with a warning. "The next time you try to put a spoke in my wheel, I'm going to really get rough with you. Now get on out of here and stay out of my sight."

Wykoff was drywashing his hands one in the other when he turned and looked at Lockridge. "Who's going to pay for all that damage?" he screeched.

"Charge it to Sharp," Lockridge snapped. "Now how much do you get for that barbed wire by the spool?"

"Dollar and a quarter a spool. Staples are two dollars a keg."

"All right," Lockridge answered, pulling out his wallet. "And the next time a customer comes in to try to buy something, try to be a little more civil to him."

5

LOCKRIDGE and young Keenan had been loading the wagon about half an hour when old Wykoff, who was in the warehouse checking out the wire, came running out the door, his eyes wide with fear. Lockridge, alert and expecting trouble, grabbed him by the arm as he tried to make for the safety of the store. "What's your hurry?" he demanded.

The old man stuttered nervously, and tried to pull away. "I just happened to remember. I've got an important meeting with a man right away. Already half an hour late. You just go on and count your wire. Excuse me."

He jerked out of Lockridge's grasp and dashed into the main part of the store, pulling the door closed behind him.

Keenan looked at Lockridge and said, "Something fishy about that. He was as scared as a sheep."

"Yeah," Lockridge answered. "Something—" His voice trailed off and he was silent a moment. Then he said, "You know what it was?"

"No, what?"

"Somebody's in that warehouse

laying for us. Probably slipped in the back door."

"But who?"

"Could be Hensen, but I've got an idea that it is Kilmer slipping in there and laying for me, to pick me up for killing that man out on the prairie. Hensen said Sharp was swearing out a warrant for me."

Keenan looked crestfallen. "I hate to see you go to jail. They would railroad you to the gallows."

"Say, tell me. Who is the official head of this town, anyway? Who runs it?"

"Why, there's no official. They don't vote here. There's no regular government. Colonel Sharp just goes on and runs it to suit himself because nobody stops him."

"Who elected Kilmer as marshal?"

"Nobody. Colonel Sharp just told him to put on a badge and be the marshal, and so he is."

"Then, the law is just whatever Colonel Sharp happens to want it to be?"

"Colonel Sharp is the only law I know anything about."

"That's good," Lockridge said. "I don't believe in defying any duly constituted authority. But Sharp has no legal authority to appoint law officers, so Kilmer is not a law officer. He's just one of Sharp's gun hands. I feel better about things already."

"They'd have no legal right to take you to jail for that killing," Keenan said.

"I'm not fixing to go to jail for that killing," Lockridge answered.

After a moment of study, Lockridge said, "There is only one thing to do now. I'll have to root Kilmer out of that warehouse, if we're to finish loading that wire."

"But you couldn't go in there again without him getting the drop on you."

"Not through this door," Lockridge admitted. "But I can go in the way he did—around the back, somewhere. Maybe I can get in back of him that way."

"All right," Keenan said. "Let's go."

"Stay behind me," Lockridge cautioned him, "and if you hear a shot before you get in, make a run for it. No use in both of us getting caught in the same trap."

LOCKRIDGE jumped off the dock onto the grass surrounding the building, so that the noise of his footsteps would not be heard. With Keenan following him, he circled the building until he found a rear door swinging open.

He stopped here long enough to examine the ground around the door. Without speaking, he pointed to fresh boot tracks in the dust just outside the opening. Keenan nodded.

Lockridge lifted his gun from its holster, then quickly slid around the door frame and stepped lightly inside the building, where he stood with his back to the wall, poised and tense while he waited a moment to see if his entrance had been discovered.

While he stood adjusting his eyes to the semi-darkness within, he examined the interior. The few small barred windows admitted little light, but permitted him to see the big stacks of feed in hundred-pound bags, cases of canned goods, plow tools, bundles of shingles and salt barrels. There were only narrow aisles between the stacks of merchandise which offered numerous places for concealment.

Lockridge heard a soft step, and Dill Keenan was in through the door and standing beside him with drawn pistol. Lockridge listened in absolute silence, but heard no sound to betray the presence of anybody else. He looked around him for something to throw, and saw a ripping chisel lying on an upended empty box.

He picked up the chisel, made a sign to Keenan to be ready, then tossed the chisel into the air. It circled over a high stack of feed bags and dropped down behind them with a thud followed by a quick clatter, as though it had landed on something relatively soft and then fallen to the floor.

The effect was instantaneous. It brought a curse and a shuffling of feet.

That betrayal of the hiding man was all that Lockridge wanted. He dashed forward with no effort at quiet, ran around the stack of feed sacks, and came face to face with the still-confused man. It was not Kilmer; it was one of his deputies.

The man looked up at him, and his jaw dropped in surprise. Then he lifted the gun which was already in his hand, and fired hastily at Lockridge's head.

That was a fatal error. Lockridge kept his gun at waist level and pulled the trigger. The bullet caught the man in the chest and knocked him backward. He thudded to the floor and rolled over and died.

This swift action brought Kilmer to light. The marshal shouted from somewhere behind another pile of merchandise, demanding surrender. His words were barely intelligible, but the room echoed with footsteps converging on the scene of the exchange of shots.

Lockridge stepped over the dead deputy and walked on to meet the approaching Kilmer, whom he had not yet seen. He heard a sudden fusillade of bullets back of him, and heard a man yell, then the sound of two men running, and another shot or two.

But having spotted the direction of Kilmer's voice, Lockridge did not turn back to the other shooting, leaving it to Keenan to look after himself. He turned the corner around the stack of mill feed, and stopped dead still.

Kilmer, the gunman marshal, was trotting down the long middle aisle with his gun out. It was too late for Lockridge to duck back to the safety of the feed bags, and it was too late for Kilmer to duck into hiding. Kilmer stopped short, and both were still for an instant.

Lockridge expected the gunman to again demand his surrender, but Kilmer was apparently thinking it over. Kilmer was standing in the light of one of the windows. Lockridge watched him carefully.

He read Kilmer's decision on his face. He saw a tenseness run through the man as his decision was formed. Otherwise, Kilmer did not move.

Then Kilmer's hand flashed upward. He was tightening his finger on the trigger of his weapon when Lockridge fired.

BOTH SHOTS rang out so close together that they sounded almost in unison. Lockridge felt the impact of Kilmer's bullet in his side. It was like the blow of a sledgehammer, and it knocked him back against the sacked feed.

He tried to catch himself, but his whole left side seemed paralyzed, and he slid to the floor. He quickly rolled over from his back to his stomach, and lay facing in Kilmer's direction as he dragged his gun up and braced it with his elbow.

Then he saw that Kilmer was also down but he was not dead. Kilmer had fallen with his back against a salt barrel, and he was sitting up with his legs spread out before him. The front of his white shirt was already with blood.

Kilmer was still alive, a dangerously wounded animal. He lifted his gun, and then put his left hand under the barrel to steady it. He was taking a very slow and careful aim, and he was having difficulty in holding the gun level and steady.

Lockridge lifted his own weapon and shot the man squarely between the eyes before the man could get his trigger pulled again.

Kilmer's body went over sideways, and he was finished.

Lockridge tried to get up. His side was still numb. He slid back down into a sitting position on the floor, and that was where he was when Dill Keenan found him.

"My man got away," Keenan said with obvious embarrassment. "I'm sorry, but I reckon maybe I got excited and didn't aim straight enough. He'll spread the word. The whole town will be after us."

"Forget it," Lockridge said encouragingly. "Everybody gets excited when the guns begin popping. Give me a hand to get on my feet, will you?"

"Are you bad hurt?" Keenan asked.

"I don't think so," Lockridge an-

swered, "We can tell when I get up."

Keenan got his hands under Lockridge's armpits and lifted him to his feet. Lockridge leaned against the feed bags to steady himself. There was a little feeling coming to his left side as the numbness wore off and was replaced by a stabbing and burning pain.

"Probably be all right," he assured Keenan. "We'd better get out of here before Sharp can get an army organized."

"Where do we go?" Keenan asked.

"Out the back way. We'll have to figure the next step when we see what's going to happen next."

"If we could only get a couple of saddle horses," Keenan fretted. "Then we could hit it out of town."

"We haven't any friends around this man's town," Lockridge assured him. "We've got to help ourselves. Out the back way, now, fellow."

Lockridge realized how right he was in surmising that Sharp was supervising the trap when they got to the back door and started out after reloading their guns.

He saw three horsemen blocking one end of the alley, and two more at the other end. Hensen was one of the latter two. Hensen saw Keenan and Lockridge just as they emerged from the alley door of the warehouse. The Swede set up a yell.

Lockridge was cornered now, and he wasted no time in parley, nor in waiting to see what Hensen's move would be. He lifted his gun and sent two bullets square at the man on the big black horse.

HENSEN tumbled off his mount with a yell in his throat. His horse reared, stepped on his body, and got the loosened reins tangled in an old roll of rusty barbed wire, where he stood rearing and trumpeting.

Keenan took his cue from Lockridge. Turning his back to his friend, he dropped to one knee and lifted his gun against the other three horsemen blocking up the other end of the alley.

His excitement was gone, and he sent his bullets steadily now in answer to the wild flurry of shots from the men on the three wildly prancing horses. He killed one of the men outright. He shot the second one while that man had his rifle to his shoulder.

The man dropped his rifle. He fell over forward in his saddle, and clung to the horn while his frantic animal turned and bolted down the alley with the man bouncing on his back.

Lockridge killed Hensen's partner just as that man slid off his horse to make himself a less conspicuous target. The horse was in such panic that he ran squarely toward Lockridge and Keenan.

Lockridge hobbled out ahead of the animal, forcing him against the wall. He caught the dragging bridle reins as the horse started to pass him, pulling the animal up short.

The firing had stopped, leaving the alley suddenly still. Young Keenan was still on one knee, reloading his pistol. Lockridge laid a hand on Keenan's shoulder. "Good work, Dill. It's all over now. Better grab that horse of Hensen's and let's get out of here while the getting is good."

While Keenan went for Hensen's horse, Lockridge started to mount the animal he had caught up. He could not make it. Too much of his strength had drained out of him.

"Give me a hand getting aboard," he said to Keenan when Keenan returned leading Hensen's horse. "I must have lost some blood."

Keenan looked worried, and questioned him while he was helping him into the saddle. "Think you can make it?" he inquired solicitously. "If you can't, we'll stick here and fight it out."

"I don't think that would be healthy," Lockridge answered. "Colonel Sharp has had almost an hour to round up men to stop us for good. We'd better try to make a run for it. Hit off down the alley, and if I can't make it, you keep going. It would be safer than for you to stick with me."

They rode down the alley along the rear of the line of stores. As

they moved, they heard occasional shouts of men out on the street in front, and from the sound of the voices they got the impression that a group of men was being organized.

"Think I heard Sharp bellowing over there," Lockridge said. "Probably getting set to surround the building."

They moved on to the end of the alley, and paused for a moment. There was no way to get out of it except to turn to the left and come out into the main street, where the shouting was going on.

Keenan asked, "What do we do?"

"When there's only one thing you can do, you do it. We hit the street and light a shuck for the country."

He was hanging onto the saddlehorn now with one hand to keep from falling off. Waves of dizziness swept over him, and he was feeling spells of nausea. The wounds in his body seemed as though they had been made with red-hot branding irons, and great sweeps of pain ran through him, convulsing him with their intensity. He was beginning to doubt that he could ride very far, but he withheld this from Keenan.

THEIR HORSES came out onto the street from between two buildings, and Lockridge turned and swept the street with his gaze. His guess was confirmed when he saw a group of men gathered in front of Wykoff's store.

Some were mounted and others stood at their horses' heads, while Colonel Sharp stood on the sidewalk, his middle adorned with a big ivory-handled gun. He was using his hands to gesticulate as he gave them orders. Lockridge could not hear him from this distance, but he could read the sign by the sweep of the colonel's gestures. The colonel was giving directions for the entire block to be surrounded by mounted men.

Lockridge said to Keenan, "We've got out of the trap before he had a chance to close it. Now stretch out and hit for the woods."

They spurred their horses toward the country road, and settled down for a long ride. But they did not escape detection.

Somebody in Sharp's crowd spotted them and set up a shout. Then a welter of voices arose, and the loudest of these was that of Colonel Sharp ordering pursuit.

Lockridge and Keenan were a quarter of a mile out of town, and had reached a turn in the road when Lockridge at last knew that he was not going to be able to make the ride. It was all he could do now to keep himself in the saddle by clinging to the horn.

He pulled his horse up alongside Keenan and told him the news.

"You keep going," he ordered. "You'll make enough dust, and the road has enough turns in it to keep you out of sight of those men almost all the way back home. They'll follow you, and that'll give me a chance to hole up somewhere till I am able to ride."

"I can't leave you like this," Keenan objected.

"We'd both be caught if you stuck with me. If we separate, you can keep out of their reach, and at the same time lead them away from me, giving me a chance to hide out till dark, when I can get a doctor. It's the only chance we've got. Get going, fellow, and keep out of their reach."

"The doctor lives in a little white cottage three doors past the jail," Keenan said. "He's an all right hombre. About the only man in town that Colonel Sharp doesn't control. I'll get some friends and come back and look for you there."

Lockridge turned his horse off the road and drove the animal into the clump of scrub oak lining the gully beside it. He pushed the animal on into the thicket until he was lost from view of the road.

Then he turned his animal back toward town, knowing one thing full well; if he did not get to a doctor soon, he would pass out from loss of blood, and that would be the end of him. And the doctor was back in town, in the midst of the enemy.

He kept out of sight as he worked his way back toward the town, but every foot of the way was added torture to him. His weakness and

the nausea in him was getting to be a living thing, fighting for control of his body and his senses. He vaguely heard the body of horsemen who had got started on the road in pursuit of Keenan, but his own difficulty now was so great that the fact slipped his mind almost immediately.

By keeping to the rear of the buildings, he came at last to the end of his trail. He could not stay on the horse any longer. His hands slipped from the horn and he slid to the ground and lay for a long time in the dust of the alley.

Then he forced himself up onto all fours and started crawling to the rear of the nearest building. He reached the door, and catching the knob, pulled himself erect. He opened the door and staggered into the place, not knowing where he was.

And then he saw where he was. He had come into the rear door of the jail.

HE STOPPED still for a moment, leaning against the wall with his hand pressed to the bleeding wound in his side. He stood thus listening for any sound of occupancy. The jail was completely silent and deserted.

He followed along the inner wall of the jail toward the front door, calling on his last reserve of strength to support him in his effort to walk. He had to get out through the front door of the building and get down the street to the white cottage where the doctor lived. And he had to go through whatever enemies might still be on the street. He was past caring how many there were. He had to reach the doctor.

He emerged from the front door of the jail and let his eyes search the street. The hitchracks were all deserted now, and there was not a man in sight. He followed along the outer wall of the jail, his feet clumping staggeringly along the board walk. He was wondering just how many more steps he could take before he would fall and be unable to get up again.

He had to stay on his feet until he had traversed that last hundred yards of walk separating him from the white cottage. He walked with his hand reaching out against the store fronts to support him while he kept his eyes glued on the doctor's house.

It was the movement that caught his eyes and made him look across the street. And there he saw and recognized Colonel Sharp as the big rancher came plunging out of Wykoff's store.

It was evident that Sharp had been standing inside the store looking out the window, and that he had seen Lockridge come staggering out of the jail. For now the colonel stepped off the walk in front of Wykoff's and started moving swiftly toward Lockridge.

Lockridge quit trying to walk, and rolled around so that the building wall supported his back. That was the only thing that kept him on his feet while he dragged his weapon out of its pouch. The gun seemed to weigh a ton.

Colonel Sharp's face was red and his eyes were glaring at Lockridge. He wasted no words as his feet picked up speed. He came running toward Lockridge. He had his ivory-handled gun in his hand, and so great was his urge to destroy Lockridge that he began firing almost at the moment he stepped off Wykoff's walk.

It was this firing while he was running that threw Sharp's aim off, so that his first two bullets buried themselves in the wall a safe distance from Lockridge. And it was that space of wasted time that gave Lockridge time to lift his own weapon and send one bullet roaring at Colonel Sharp.

Lockridge's bullet hit the colonel with an audible impact and knocked him on his back in the dust. The colonel rolled over and got up on his hands and knees, and pushed himself upward. He stood on spraddled legs, his hat gone. He looked vacantly until he looked over his shoulder and saw Lockridge still leaning against the store wall. Then the colonel turned around facing him again, and lifted his weapon.

Lockridge shot him in the head this time, and Colonel Sharp's finger pulled the trigger of his weapon just as he fell again. His bullet went into the ground almost at his own feet.

Lockridge kept the man covered with his weapon, then staggered out into the street and stood over him, looking down at him. Colonel Sharp had rolled over onto his face, and he lay there with blood running out the fatal bullet hole just above his left eye.

Colonel Sharp was dead. The settlers were free of their trouble.

Then with the sudden removal of his tension, Lockridge's great weakness caught up with him. Things went black, and he felt himself falling. He fell over the body of the man who had set the whole Pushmo-line out to kill him.

LOCKRIDGE came to his senses a day later, lying in a clean white bed in the doctor's cottage. And in the room there were Dill Keenan and his sister, who had been waiting for his return to consciousness.

Keenan came over and sat down in the chair beside the bed. "You're a hard man to kill, Lockridge," he grinned. "But it's lucky for us you were. I reckon your tough hide has saved the hides of all the rest of us. That's what Nixon says, anyhow, and everybody else feels the same. We're all going to be mighty proud to welcome you as a neighbor."

"How did you make out with the posse?" Lockridge asked.

"Nothing to it," Keenan answered. "I kept ahead of them all the way home, and Nixon and some of his boys met them with rifles. Those riders didn't like the prospect of facing that much lead, so they just dropped the matter. After all, it wasn't their fight."

Lockridge looked at the girl who had stood back up to now. "Think you could stand a man that used to wear a big hat for a neighbor?"

Ruth Keenan answered. "I made Dill go and find your hat. It's out at our place, waiting for you to come and claim it."

"In that case," Lockridge answered, "I'll be right over. I wouldn't want it to be in your way."

"Oh! It's not in the way. It's hung on a nail."

"Then in that case, I'll see that it spends a lot of time on that nail."

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ASPEN GULCH was a new, raw cluster of tents and log cabins near the mouth of gold-floored Aspen Creek, which had brought in a roaring mass of prospectors.

Wade Carnigan hoped that here among strangers he would find the chance he had always wanted, the chance to live his own life, free from the shadow of his father's memory.

In the tent where Jason Jones had set up a stove and some pine trestle tables and benches, young Carnigan, with a flour sack tied across his front for an apron, was trying to serve the supper of stewed deer meat and coffee to the packed throng of hungry men.

One of these wolfish prospectors was a big man with two gold teeth, uncut black hair and a dirty neck and fingernails, and he stopped Carnigan in the aisle by reaching out and grabbing his apron.

"Ain't you Carney Carnigan's whelp?" he asked loudly. "I seen you down at Deerlick."

Carnigan's face tightened with a 'don't-step-on-me' kind of touchiness which should have been a warning to the man, but was not. Carnigan pushed on down the aisle and went about his business.

As he came back past the man, he was carrying a heavy load of dirty dishes on a tray held over his head. The man, angry at not having got an answer from him before, stuck out his foot and tripped him.

The dishes crashed. Carnigan sprawled flat on the dirt floor of the tent, lying prone between two of the long, crowded tables. He got up onto hands and knees, shook the cobwebs out of his brain, and then got to his feet.

In the corner where he was dishing up the food at the stove, Jason Jones, sour and snappish, yelled a curse at Carnigan for his awkwardness. Carnigan ignored it and turned on the man who had tripped him.

He did not speak to the man. He reached out and caught him by the long locks of his uncut hair and dragged him off the bench at the table, and out into the aisle. And then he cocked his fist and hit the man in the face. Hard.

The blow cracked sharply. The man went over backward onto the trestle table and knocked it over,

"You're like your Dad, son; he wanted something for nothing, too. Only you don't try to get it with a gun. But because you don't get it, you're sore at the world!"

"If that mob gets hold of this miner, there'll be a lynching!"

spilling food and dishes into the laps of the dozen seated men. They grumbled and scrambled out of the wreckage.

The gold-toothed man was up on his elbow. He wiped the blood from his nose and got to his feet. He lowered his head and came at Carnigan, lashing out with big ham-like fists. It was a fight, a brawl, and the blows flew between Carnigan and the miner. Some of them landed. Some did not. And they were punishing.

One of the men at the table yelled. "What's the matter, Shelly? Can't you whip a kid?"

Another yelled, "Watch it, Brass Tooth. He'll slaughter you."

Carnigan thought, *another job gone. Something always happens.* He waded into the man, going forward with a cold punishing ferocity. It gave him relief from the feeling that always haunted him.

IT WAS GOOD to be able to strike back once in a while. All his angry thoughts were coming to the surface in him, like they were always doing when trouble brewed, and they gave strength to his muscles.

The man's fist struck Carnigan's jaw and staggered him, and he fell over backwards onto another crowded table. The fall knocked a miner's stew into his lap. The man jumped up and hit Carnigan behind the ear.

Still another man hit that one, shouting, "Lay off the kid! It wasn't his fault."

Those two men fought, and then others. And that was how the riot spread, like a notion to stampede travels through a herd of stock.

The tent was in a turmoil of cursing men and flying fists and plates, and somehow all this action was good to Carnigan, for it was a form of relief from too many things held back in him.

He straightened the gold-toothed man with his fist, and the man's head flew upward. The man grunted and lashed out again, missing Carnigan's face, but scraping his ear.

Carnigan came in at him again, driving the man backward slowly, trading blows with him, taking the man's punishment, giving punishment, asking for no odds. The man walked into one hard blow, and the force of it made pulp of his lips. He spat blood.

The miner was back at Carnigan now, and he had got a knife out of his pocket holding its blade low and edge-upward. He came in carefully on his boot-toes—then lunged at Carnigan.

Carnigan sidestepped the lunge, throwing out his arms as the man passed him. He caught the miner around the neck and dragged him to the floor. When the miner fell, his own knife held in his own hand, ripped into his own throat just above the collar bone, and the blood trickled from the wound and ran down his shirt collar. The man dropped his knife, clasped his throat, and all the fight was drained from him.

The milling and fighting crowd was beyond paying any attention to the screeching and cursing of Jason Jones who had grabbed up a kindling axe and was threatening the fighters. Two men were wrestling for a coffee pot that one of them held as a weapon. They bounced over against the center pole of the tent, and their combined weight and strength snapped the half-rotted wood at shoulder height.

The top of the tent collapsed, blanketing the mob in darkness beneath the dirty canvas. They forgot their fighting, and now fought to get out from under the folds of the collapsed tent.

Carnigan, caught like the rest, thought of the man he had been fighting, knew that he was helpless to extricate himself. He picked up the man's knife and ripped the canvas covering him, then caught the man by the collar of his flannel shirt, and fought his way out, dragging his burden with him.

Carnigan smelled the smoke. Somebody yelled, "fire!" The cook stove had ignited the canvas which had fallen on it.

And there were still men under that canvas.

HE LEFT his opponent in the muddy street while he went back, walking over the fallen canvas with the knife, ripping it open at every point where he saw the contours of a man, extricating them from where they were trapped. He went in again and again, ripping canvas, giving men a hand, getting the dazed ones out to safety.

The canvas was old and tinder dry, and it burned like paper. Crowds poured out of saloons and dance halls and came to watch.

Old Jason Jones, waving his dirty flour-sack apron, danced around in a panic, trying to save his few cases of canned food, ignoring the men still trapped under the tent. He was completely beside himself, a man gone wild at the loss of his business.

Aspen Gulch had its excitement for half an hour.

They got everybody out. The cut

on the prospector's throat was not a serious thing, and the man got up and melted into the crowd. Jason Jones' dining tent was a pattern of black ashes and a few charred and smoking sticks.

Wade Carnigan sat against a nearby cabin and looked at it with a kind of resigned hopelessness. Jason would blame him; it was something like a symbol of everything that had happened to him. This time, he had lost his meal ticket and a place to sleep in the tent, and a few extra dollars a week. This job had gone the way all his jobs went.

And it was there that Jason Jones found Carnigan. He had brought Marshal Bascomb along with him.

Jason was still seething. He pointed his skinny finger at the youth.

"There he is, Marshal! There's the bum that ruined me! Arrest him and keep him in jail till he rots. Hang him!"

Marshal Bascomb was a little on the stout side, a quiet and reserved old-line town-tamer who listened to everybody and trusted nobody. He seldom spoke, and when he did, he meant what he said. He did not like to have to repeat things.

"Let's take a walk, son," Bascomb said to him.

There was a compelling quality about the marshal which demanded obedience, and Carnigan got up.

"Take him to jail, and keep him there till he pays for my restaurant," Jason Jones barked.

"What jail?"

Jones wilted somewhat under the Marshal's penetrating look. "Why—any jail. Hold him somewhere till we get a jail in this town."

"Tell me," Marshal Bascomb asked speculatively. "Do you know how to run a restaurant?"

"Sure I do. I've run one all my life."

"Good," the marshal answered. "You run a restaurant and I'll run my job. Come on, son."

Carnigan walked with the marshal until they came to another small restaurant made of new boards. The marshal stopped in front of this.

"I haven't had supper yet," he said. "Come on in."

"I'll wait outside," Carnigan answered.

The marshal gave him a brief look and asked, "I suppose you've already eaten?"

"No. I wasn't supposed to eat until after the customers were out of the place."

"All right, you can eat now."

"I'm not hungry."

"You mean you haven't got the price of a meal?"

Though Carnigan did not answer, the marshal saw that he had guessed correctly. "Come on in. You're in my custody now, and I'm supposed to feed you."

SOMEHOW, Carnigan got the idea that it was not because he was in the marshal's custody, but because the marshal didn't like to think of him being hungry, that the marshal took him into the place and ordered meals for both of them.

The marshal did not talk much as they ate, and when they had finished, he paid the bill and took Carnigan down to a one-room board shack which was his home. They went inside, and the marshal took off his coat and gun and hung them up on nails driven in the exposed wall studding.

"You'll sleep here tonight," he said. "I can give you a couple of blankets to make a pallet on the floor."

Then the old man lit his pipe and settled down in his chair, and Carnigan saw a talk coming on. He never liked talks, because they invariably ended up badly for him.

"I was asking around about what happened, awhile ago," he said. "I suppose you was justified in a way for hitting that prospector that tripped you. But I gather that you're a pretty touchy young man. You've had half a dozen fights since you've been here. Kind of like a scorpion, elevating his poison tail and daring anybody to step on him. How come you got that attitude, son?"

"I just don't like for people to step on me."

"Nobody does. But that depends on what you consider being stepped

on. By the way, where'd you come from?"

"Down around Deerlick," Carnigan answered with a growing sense of impending trouble.

"I heard about some Carnigans down there. You related to Carney Carnigan?"

There was a defensive anger in Carnigan's voice as he answered.

"Yes," he said defiantly. "He was my father, but that don't mean that everybody has got a right to push me around. I never stole a cow nor anything else in my life. I didn't live with my father. I don't know a thing about him, except what I hear. And I'm sick and tired of being branded with his reputation."

"Yeah. So that's why you've always got your stinger out," the marshal answered thoughtfully.

The marshal smoked his pipe in silence a long while, then asked, "Will you stay here over night? I've got to make a few rounds before I can turn in."

"Yes, I'll stay," Carnigan answered. He had no place to sleep, and he knew that he could not get away from the town except on foot, which was out of the question because of the distance to the nearest settlement.

"All right. I'll take your word for it."

"Am I under arrest?" Carnigan asked.

"Not now. I haven't decided what to do about you. I'll figure it out when I have time."

The old man put on his coat and gun and went out to make the rounds of the roaring camp.

CARNIGAN WAS tired, and he took the blankets the marshal had shown him, and bedded down. He supposed the marshal would give him twenty-four hours to get out of town tomorrow. That had happened before. He was asleep when the marshal returned at midnight.

He was still asleep the next morning when a loud call from outside wakened him and the marshal who had come in and gone to bed without his knowing it.

A man had come up on a mule, and he leaned over his saddle horn and called to Bascomb. "There's some trouble down the gulch. They want you out there."

"What happened?" the marshal asked, opening the door.

"It's old Toby Wingate. He's dead."

"How come?"

"He was in town over night getting supplies, and when he got back to his claim at daylight, he found Brass Tooth Shelly had changed his markers and was taking it over. They had a fight, and Brass Tooth shot him dead."

"Where's Shelly now?"

"He's got himself barricaded in Toby's cabin, and we can't get him out. He's shootin' at everybody that comes in reach of his gun. If he holds out till dark, he'll get away."

The marshal said, "All right, I'll go get him. Tell the boys to keep him busy till I get there."

The man on the mule turned his animal and hit out through the mud back to the diggings.

Bascomb turned and looked at Carnigan speculatively while he dressed. "I haven't decided what to do with you, yet. We haven't got a jail, and I don't want any more trouble from you while I'm gone." He paused, thinking a minute. "Well, I reckon the only thing to do is to take you along with me so I can keep an eye on you till I decide. Come on, we'll walk down to the diggings."

They finished dressing and walked down the trail where it followed the gulch, which was now running water from the spring rains. Some of the prospectors were panning the gravel out of side draws, others, more ambitious, had built long toms and were sluicing their gravel. Others with picks were digging gravel from under layers of clay and loam, and others seemed to be doing nothing at all but sitting and talking. The marshal and Carnigan went along down the draw in silence, the marshal returning an occasional greeting, and then dropping back into his thoughtful silence.

They passed a claim that had been worked clean of all its gravel. A few lumps of rock showed where the miner had broken out enough to examine the solid stone and then had given up working his claim. Marshal Bascomb picked up a piece of the stone and examined it.

Then he asked casually, "How come you didn't stake a claim and work it?"

"I did; this was my claim." Carnigan answered defensively. "But there wasn't hardly any free gold at all in the gravel. It didn't pay off for the work it took to get it out."

The marshal had apparently come to a sudden decision. "I'm going to tell you something, Carnigan. It might do you some good, and it might not. You know what your trouble is? It's the same trouble your father had."

"I told you I didn't have any connection with him. I'm not a thief, and my mother left my father as soon as she found out that he was. I'm not like him at all."

"You're more like him than you realize," Marshal Bascomb said. "You are also like these prospectors here. You're looking for something for nothing. Your dad wanted something for nothing and went out and got what he wanted. You want something for nothing, too. But you don't go out and try to get it with a gun. And because you don't get it, you're sore at the world."

"I never said anything like that," Carnigan answered shortly. "If I have trouble with people, it's because they hate me on account of my father."

"Maybe. But instead of showing them you're not like your old man, the only thing you do is to get mad and try to whip 'em. You know why?"

"Why?"

"Because, you are looking for free gold, and when you don't get it, you quit. Then you blame your troubles on your father. Did you ever stop to ask yourself how much you contributed to your own difficulties?"

"I never quite looked at it that way before," he said tensely.

"Well, that's the way I see it," the marshal said. "You've got it in you to fight. It's a shame you don't use it to fight *for* something instead of *against* something."

THE MARSHAL dropped back into silence, and they came in a few minutes to a bend in the gulch and rounded it—to run into a group of men scattered behind trees, behind cutbanks and boulders. A few of them had handguns, one had a rifle. They were all observing a tent under a big sycamore tree on the bank of the gulch.

The tent had pole walls running three feet up from the ground, over which the canvas gable, now gray with age, was set. A joint of rusty stovepipe protruded from the gable end of the canvas. The flaps of the tent were closed and it was ominously quiet. This was where old Toby Wingate had lived.

Ignoring the possibility of flying lead, the marshal went toward the nearest man who was in a cluster of jack oaks. The man nodded to him as he approached with Carnigan alongside of him.

"Shelly still in there?" Bascomb asked.

"Yeah. In there with old Toby's body, and his poke, I reckon. And he's got Toby's rifle. Otherwise we'd have hung him by now."

"That's no good," Marshal Bascomb said quietly. "You boys forget that hanging idea."

"You better not head for that tent," the man cautioned. "Shelly is bad medicine any time. Now he's half-drunk and mad-dog mean."

"Well, it's my job," Bascomb said quietly. "I'll go get him." He turned to Carnigan. "You wait here."

Then, as though he were walking down an empty street, he started toward the tent. He stopped after a few paces and called out, "Shelly, come out of there with your hands up. You're under arrest."

A growling voice came from inside the tent. "Come and get me, Bascomb. I've got a bullet with your name on it."

Marshal Bascomb did not even an-

swer the challenge, but started forward across the clearing, drawing his pistol as he walked squarely toward the tent.

The man behind the tree said tensely, "Hey, Marshal! Don't be a fool. Come back here before he kills you."

Marshal Bascomb walked on without hearing the advice.

The voice came again from the tent.

"I warned you. Now see how you like this!"

The muzzle of a rifle nosed out from between the door flaps of the tent. Shelly threw a quick snap-shot at the marshal.

The lawman had planned on that, and his gun roared twice, sending two forty-five slugs crashing through the door flaps, one on each side of the rifle barrel.

A second bullet from Shelly's rifle drilled the marshal in the leg, knocking him down in the mud.

A gruff laugh came from within the tent.

"No good, Marshal. Let's play another hand."

CARNIGAN suddenly darted out into the clearing, racing toward the marshal. Bascomb was trying to crawl back to safety. Carnigan caught the officer under the armpits and dragged him back to the protection of the small cluster of oaks.

Shelly sent a fusillade of shots at them from the tent.

"That's all right. Thanks," Bascomb said. "Just set me down. I'll be all right in a minute."

Carnigan took his knife and slit the marshal's pants leg. "You won't be all right for awhile," he said. "That leg is bleeding pretty bad. You'll have to get a tourniquet on it."

"No," Bascomb said. "I've got to get Shelly out of there. He'll kill more men if I don't."

"But you're hurt. You'll be taking an awful chance."

"That's what I'm paid for," Bascomb answered matter-of-factly. "It's my responsibility—not anybody else's."

Carnigan hesitated over what he was trying to say, then forced it out. "Look, Marshal, you can't get around; how about me getting him for you?"

The marshal, lying on his back in the clump of trees, looked up queerly at Carnigan. "I'm paid for doing that. You don't owe me anything."

"I see it different," Carnigan answered. "Anyway, I'll get Shelly for you."

Bascomb thought this over a minute, studied Carnigan's face carefully, then pulled his gun out of his holster. "Suit yourself; you can try, if you like," he said. "Better take this."

Carnigan took the weapon Bascomb offered him, and shoved it into his belt.

"Mister," he said to one of the men who had gathered here from other places of safety, "when you see me wave my hat, give Shelly a dusting of lead, will you? You won't be able to hit him through those logs, but you'll get his attention while I come up on him."

"Are you crazy?" the man asked.

"Maybe," Carnigan answered, and turned and disappeared over a rise a few yards from the trees.

He kept the low rise between himself and the tent until he had come around behind it and approached the sycamore from the rear of the tent. The tree's wide-spreading limbs started within the reach of his raised arms, and he caught a limb and lifted himself up. He climbed up the tree and out onto a limb which projected over the canvas roof of the old tent.

Then he waved his hat in a signal to those in the clump of oaks who were watching him. The man in the grove lifted his rifle and sent a couple of bullets into the pole sides of the tent.

INSIDE the tent, Brass Tooth Shelly stuck his rifle barrel out through the tent flaps forming the front entrance. He sent a couple of answering shots at the trees. Carnigan heard him laugh.

At that moment, Carnigan took his pistol out of his belt and jumped out of the tree. He landed on the

rotten-canvas tent roof. As he had expected, his weight ripped the old canvas, and he went through it and landed on the dirt floor beside the body of Wingate.

Carnigan's sudden entrance through the roof brought Brass Tooth Shelly whirling around with his rifle in his hands. Carnigan got to his feet at the moment he fell and dived for Shelly, using his gun as a short club.

Shelly fired his rifle once. The bullet grazed the flesh of Carnigan's side, but merely burned it.

Shelly lifted his gun like a club and brought it down toward Carnigan's head. Carnigan sidestepped it, and it landed on his left shoulder, numbing it for a moment.

Then Carnigan was in close and clubbing Shelly with his pistol. Shelly's rifle was no use at such close quarters, and he dropped it and pulled out his sheath knife. He slashed out with it, and its razor sharp blade ripped the shirt down Carnigan's shoulder, drawing a thin line in blood on the skin of his arm.

Carnigan watched the next pass of the knife, and clubbed the man's descending wrist with his gunbarrel. The knife clattered to the clay floor and fell down by the body of old Wingate. Then Carnigan got Shelly by the collar of his shirt and undershirt, and worked him into submission, lacing his head with his pistol. Shelly gradually went down to his knees.

"That's enough," he whined. "You ain't got no right to butt in. This was just a personal argument between me and Wingate."

"Maybe," Carnigan said. "But to me it's just a plain robbery and killing. You wanted something for nothing, just like a lot of other people. And you get sore when you don't get it. Come on out. The marshal wants to see you."

And Carnigan did not realize that the change within himself had been so great that now he had echoed the marshal's words.

Carnigan picked up the man's rifle and marched him out to the clump of oaks where the marshal lay. The crowd had gathered here now. Some of the men began to raise their voices in mob talk. Carnigan looked them over, cradled the rifle in his arm, and said: "You heard the marshal say he was handling this man. I'm handling him till the marshal takes over. And the first man that tries to take Shelly away from me gets a bullet in him."

They looked at him and saw that he was not bluffing.

ONE OF the prospectors had put a tourniquet on the marshal's leg. Two others were coming up with a pair of mules and a wagon. Bascomb passed his handcuffs to Carnigan. Carnigan marched Shelly out to the wagon and cuffed the man to the brake handle. He helped get the marshal onto some quilts in the wagon bed. Then he got in with him, and the team started back to town. The rest of the prospectors started digging a grave for old Wingate.

Carnigan was silent a long time while the wagon was jolting through the muddy ruts, then he spoke to the marshal.

"About those things you was telling me. I see what you mean, now. I was just wondering, after I serve my sentence, you reckon it would be all right with you if I stuck around and got some kind of job till I could get a stake to go back working my claim?"

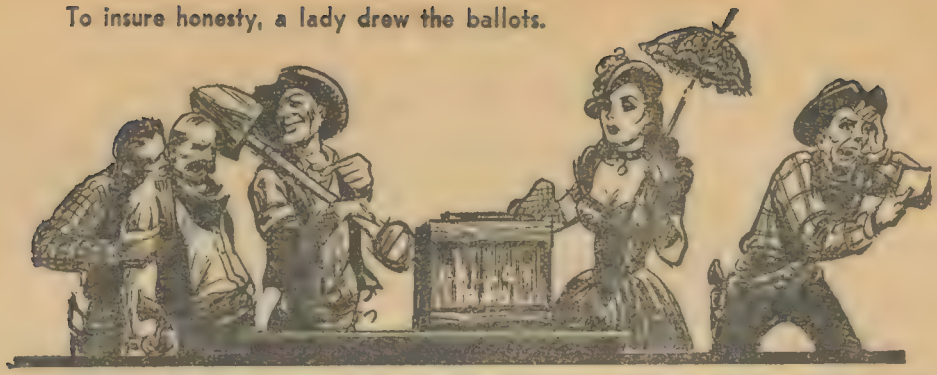
"What sentence?" the marshal answered. "I told you before that I hadn't decided what to do with you. Now I have. I'm going to grubstake you while you go back and work your claim like you should. You can sleep in my shack and get your groceries on my account as long as you are willing to work."

"If work will get me anything," Carnigan answered, "I won't be imposing on you very long. Let's see, now. First off, I want a pick and shovel—"

"A man that wants working tools first won't want for anything very long," the marshal answered with a satisfied smile. "You'll make out."

●

To insure honesty, a lady drew the ballots.



ABLE CAIN'S DRAWING

by A. A. BAKER

(Author of "Able Cain's Plague")

Everyone was willing to contribute cash to making Apex safe from fire, but no one wanted to lose time in working on the project. So Judge Cain arranged a fair-and-square ballot system to determine who should pay and who should work. Only that led to a worse sqaubble than before!

ABLE CAIN leaned back in his barrel chair, pushed his top hat to the back of his bushy hair, wrapped one booted leg around the rail of the hotel porch and gazed out at the murky Sierra sky. He sniffed, then looked over at Pike Peel who was sleeping soundly in the next chair; sleeping noisily, with his shirt smoking from a forgotten cigar.

With a grin, Judge Cain slapped the dozer across the chest with his hat, let out a wild yell of "Fire!" that startled the horses hitched to the rail, and brought Peel out of his chair with such a rush he tumbled over the railing and into the street. He awoke running, and was halfwav down the street, in the direction of the fire house, before the laughter of the bystanders tipped him off that he had been the victim of Cain's humor.

Peel belligerently moved back toward the porch, each step of his spidery legs a proud protest against such indignity. "Ain't no way to treat a man, Judge!" he protested. "I might'a broke a leg! Might'a scared one of them horses so bad he'd run away an' maybe broke *his* leg. Horses is..."

"You're right," answered the judge, "absolutely right. I'm real sorry I did that. Never thought about injuring one of them horses!"

"What about one of my legs?" shouted Peel. "Horses can be shot if'n..."

"So can skinny galoots who set fires!" snapped Able Cain. "You might'a set this whole town afire. Laying there snoozing with a lighted stogie burning your shirt! Afore the burn got through that thick hide of yours, one of them lace curtains might'a blowed out and caught fire then, zoom, we got us a hotel burning! Before we can put it out, it jumps to the bar next door, then to the meat market and so on, until

we are standing around looking at the mighty fair little city of Apex going up in flames!"

"Wait a minute Judge, hold your horses; who done all that?" shouted the little deputy. "All I done was go to sleep with a cigar in my mouth!"

"Could happen," growled the judge. "Look at them weeds growing between the buildings. Dry weeds with stickers that would float in the wind and carry the fire all over the mountains! Like Hangtown burnt. Four times it burnt, twice in one year. Wiped out in a raging flame. The iron windows and doors didn't help much either. Just suffocated some of the folks trapped inside the buildings."

"Just like that old Chinaman burnt up, down in Swede's Flat last summer," contributed Peel. "Locked hisself inside an' even the adobe crumbled, like in a dutch oven. Fire doors don't help much when these mountains catch fire."

The judge pointed a long finger at the sky. "There's a fire out in the hills right now. Seems there's been a forest fire here 'bouts most of the summer. One burns out, after it takes a few towns and another starts. Then the prospectors cut across the burnt over part and fall into a burning stump! Like Low Johnson."

"Low did all right," grinned Peel. "When he was fightin' his way out'a that fire he laid in Dutch Creek, right on top of a two pound nugget! Laid in the water all night with this rock stickin' in his back. He got to feelin' around an' found he'd been lyin' on two pounds of gold. Says the whole state can burn if'n it brings him that kind of luck!"

"Maybe a few might benefit from a fire," growled the judge. "Most people suffer. Ever hear a horse scream with fear? Ever watch a cow walk right into a fire? Cows get used to following a trail; let a fire start, and they'll follow the same path right into it!"

THEY GAZED out into the street while the judge pondered. As self-elected law of the mountain town of Apex, he assumed certain responsibilities for civic welfare that often probed him into trouble. The direction of local affairs was left in his hands since the time he had interrupted a hanging ordered by the local Miner's Court. The victim had been hoisted and was waiting for the drop when Able Cain walked into the group with a lighted dynamite stick. "If'n you drop that man," he'd remarked casually, "half of you will beat him into eternity! Wasn't his fault," he continued coolly; "the butcher came after him with a meat axe. Any one of you would have defended yourselves. I know he's a Swede's Flat man, so cut him down and run him back home. That's punishment a'plenty!"

The judge had his way and hastily got rid of the dynamite but, from then on, he was never rid of the responsibility for the town's behavior and was often close to having his own neck stretched for some of his actions attempting to lead the citizens of Apex down the straight and narrow.

The gold country was filled with the brave, the strong, and the bold—with tempers to match. They lived hard, worked hard, and a man's death was not important; but the reason for his dying was always given serious thought. The mountains claimed a deadly toll in exchange for the glitter of golden bounty that sprinkled high ledges and trickling, whispering streams.

Some of these Argonauts struck it and moved up on Plushbottom Hill to grow soft in corduroy pants. These brought their women in to live in the luxury of fine homes, with servants to lift the heavy pans and to sand-clean the doors and scour the copper lamps. Luxuries, new in San Francisco, were common in Apex, brought directly from France and China. Laundry in San Francisco was often sent to China, but the rich men of Apex brought in their own Chinaboys and had their laundry done at home. The hills were rotten with gold and the mansions on Plushbottom Hill grew in number until the town was almost evenly divided

between the rich, and the men struggling to get rich.

Judge Able Cain had sat and watched the town grow. His barrel chair was his court and was close to O'Connell's bar so he could stimulate his tired brain. Pike Peel acted as runner, deputy and general flunky.

This day, the judge had fire on his mind and he finally rose, stepped inside where he donned his black frock coat as badge of office, and climbed the balcony of the hotel. He fired off his Navy Colt half a dozen times to attract attention, waited patiently and, when nobody even glanced up, shouted, "Pike! Go down and ring the fire bell. These people are so used to shots they don't look around any more. If'n they ask why the bell is ringing, tell them I got word Swede's Flat is afire and that'll bring 'em. They'll want to go down and watch her burn! Get on and ring that bell!"

THE TOLLING brought men out of their homes on the Hill and miners from their hovels in Lower Town. They were laughing and joshing about the burning of Swede's Flat and one drunk hollered, "Jedge. git to work now an' set up a line of guards around Apex, then none of them Swede's Flatters kin sneak in!" The crowd roared and the judge began his speech.

"We are faced with a problem and action by the community is demanded. Look out over the mountains!" The citizens gazed at the smoky sky. "There's another forest fire burning up there. It calls to mind the many fires we're pestered with and we must prepare our defenses in case she reaches us. You all realize we've just been lucky. If a fire ever gets going in Apex, she'll wipe us out faster than a bear goes through a blackberry patch! There's two things we've got to do. First, remove the unsightly weeds and deadwood from our streets. A match in that patch of grass next to O'Connell's Saloon would start off a whopping big fire.

"Then, when that's finished, we got to build us a reservoir. Yep, a nice big, deep reservoir to catch the winter water and hold it until summer." He aimed an arm toward Plushbottom Hill, "You're safe on the Hill 'cause the houses are separated some. You're even safer if'n you got a reservoir that'll give a back pressure to get the water to you in case of a big fire. All we got now are wells and a fire engine to pump. T'aint enough. We need water pressure!"

"You're right, Judge!" The big man shouted from O'Connell's steps, "Let's all pitch in and get her dug! I'll contribute..." he offered magnanimously, "...five thousand dollars!"

Before the judge could accept the offer a booted miner yelled, "He'll give five thousand, yeah, but who'll do the work? You willin' to get in the ditch an' do some diggin', Heavy?"

The lower town miners jeered and the miner continued, "Them slickers on Plushbottom Hill is probably all willin' to fatten the kitty but we'll have to do the diggin'! Shore Judge, we need a reservoir, but not bad enough to give up minin' 'til she's dug! Fires don't fret us none in lower town. My shack could burn tomorrow an' I wouldn't be out nothin'. 'Nother thing, I ain't workin' in a reservoir when I can be minin'. Let them swabs on the Hill come out an' dig her, they got nothin' but free time. It'd help 'em work off some of their blubber!" Half the group whooped in agreement, while the man from the Hill glowered in self conscious anger.

"Let's not get riled up!" shouted the judge. "Let's put our community spirit together and puzzle her out. First, we are all agreed we need a reservoir, right?" There was a muttered assent. "Now, see if I state the problem correct. You miners that live in lower town ain't willing to work for wages 'cause you want to get on with your mining and this is so you can strike it and be able to move up on the Hill. Right so far?" The mutter of assent was repeated.

"That ain't only right, Judge," shouted a lower town miner, "but, if'n they's work done like's needed,

them swabs on the Hill is goin' to do their share of the sweatin'! Thet is, if'n they remember how to sweat. One of us fella's'll be doin' twic't the work of them, so's they should bear the expenses, too!"

The fat man on the bar steps blew up. "Listen, you crumb-handed garbage-muckers, I can hold a bit or drive a single jack with the best! I came into this country when you was in swaddling clothes, when they was *men* on the rivers. Men who fought off the Indians with one hand and dug gravel with the other. I come across the country with Kit Carson's mountain men and fought with Stevenson's regiment, just like the rest of the men on the Hill! We hit it first and don't have to work anymore, but by gollies, I still can do twice the digging of any man you got in Lower Town!" The fire in his speech took his breath and he held onto the railing for support.

"All right you fat-blowhard-ex-mountain-man!" shrilled the miner, "you'll get a chance to do some mucking alongside some real minin' men. Judge, you set up a ballot drawing box an' we'll all draw for work!"

The crowd echoed a roar of fighting challenge and the dogs stumbled sleepily from under the board walk to see what the excitement was all about. The bellows carried down to the Bear River at the end of the canyon and prospectors hurriedly stacked their tools and raced toward town. Any unusual noise attracted the river miners, they figured someone had made a strike and didn't want to miss any of the free drinking.

THE JUDGE pondered the matter and threw fire on the troubled waters, "Let's see if Jeb Bellow is right about the folks on Plushbottom Hill. We'll hold our drawing and every other ballot will be marked 'five days pay, or five days work.' The other ballots will be blank. It'll be a gamble either way. If'n a man picks a blank ballot, he don't do no work. If'n he picks a ballot that's marked, then he either does five days work or pays five days pay..."

"That's the deal," interrupted the lower town miner. "*Then* we'll see if'n old Bellows over there an' the rest of his lace-handkerchief pals on the Hill is willin' to work or jest want to pay off!"

Bellows grunted, "Get on with the drawing!" He spit a stream of tobacco juice so furiously, that the dust rose a foot.

"We'll have the ballots ready this evening and, so's they won't be any chance of cheating," shouted the judge, "we'll let the ladies do the drawing."

The crowd milled about the streets the rest of the afternoon. O'Connell did a big business, both in selling liquor and in holding betting money. There were several fights between the two factions. The men from the Hill, not being up on their rough and tumble fighting, took home the majority of broken noses and cracked teeth. A man from Swede's Flats, sneaked into the town and stole a team of mules. The judge lost time preparing the ballots when a miner fell off O'Connell's steps into the dry grass and swallowed a sticker. He had to knock the man's teeth out before he could reach the sticker with the blacksmith's nail pullers.

Finally, he donned his frock coat and climbed the hotel balcony. The crowd quickly gathered. "Friends," he began, "everything is prepared and ready for the drawing so's we can get to building our reservoir. Reminds me of the community spirit of the Mormons. They work together and their settlement on the Great Salt Lake is a prime example of the will to work collectively. Many of you men and women owe your lives to their generosity in providing provisions for your last dangerous dash, across the mighty Nevada sinks and deserts, into California. The salt meat they cured in the Lake provided the only food that kept, as the wagon trains sweated through the blistering Nevada heat. As I said, it was this community spirit that built their promised land and now we are embarking upon a community project that will benefit the lot of us. May this be but the first of such projects to

enhance the lives of our city of Apex!" He paused for the crowd to comment upon his eloquence, then continued.

"If'n you ladies," he motioned to the women in the crowd, "will join me on the balcony, we'll start the drawing. I'll call out a name and the little lady will dip into the box and come out with a ballot. The ballot may be blank or, it may cause you to donate five days work or the equivalent in money. It'll be your choice. Work, or pay. First name, Jeb Bellows! Please draw a ballot, madam."

The crowd hushed and the lady reached a dainty hand into the box. She handed the slip to Able Cain and he read it aloud, "Five day's work, or five day's pay." The crowd laughed, "What's your pleasure, Jeb?"

"Five days work!" shouted Jeb Bellows, his voice hollowly defiant. The men from the Hill yipped and O'Connell started paying off bets.

And, so it went. A lady drew a ballot and, to a man, each agreed to work. Not a soul, from lower town or the Hill, offered to donate money for work. Late in the evening the drawing was finished and Able Cain gave his directions.

"We'll start tomorrow morning. Gather here, before the hotel, and we'll make up gangs and set the jobs for each gang. I've had the blacksmith chose the spot and we'll spend the rest of the night getting those plans in shape. Hey, O'Connell, don't close up your bar; the smithy and I will work there tonight!"

MORNING DAWNED, with its mountain sky still hazy with fire smoke, and the men gathered before the hotel. They waited and quipped in the brightening sunlight until, finally, O'Connell got help to carry the judge and the smithy to the balcony. They slapped the two men awake with towels dipped in cold mountain water and the judge got things under way.

He mixed the lower town men with men from the Hill and sent them off under the blacksmith's direction. The men whooped off and Able Cain went to bed. The mountains' air of peace held, but not for long. Pike Peel rushed in and shook the judge awake.

"They're fightin' instead of diggin'! Judge, them lower town men is bustin' things wide open. One fella is chasin' Bellows over Appletree Hill with a five pound hammer! They was out'a sight of the blacksmith afore he could get his shotgun. He's up there now, holdin' them, but they's awful anxious to fight so we better get goin'."

The judge grabbed his frock coat, hat and scooted out into the street. He ran back for his Navy Colts and shouted at Peel who was hastily packing the judge's carpet bag. "What in tarnation you doing that for?"

Peel look surprised, "We're gettin' out of town, ain't we? Them men up there is ready to kill somebody, an' they'll blame it all on you for startin' this deal!"

The judge paled but stood his ground thoughtfully. "What's the fighting about, Pike? What brought it on?"

"It's cause none of them'll take orders from the other! Bellows started it all when he began throwin' his weight around the blastin' crew. He started usin' a five pound hammer, whils't a lower town man was shiftin' the drill, an' busted the man's hand. That wasn't so bad, 'cause it's happened one time or t'other to all hard rock miners, but, when he started givin' orders, then the works *really* blew! He'd set on a rock an' tell the men where to drill. Then, some of the other Hill men got tired an' climbed out of the hole an' told the other men how, an' what, to do.

"Them Hill fellas made their strike the hard way onc't," said Pike, continuing to pack at furious speed, "but they've got so used to settin' 'round, givin' orders to them Chinaboys, they've forgot how to act like workin' men." Pike snapped the carpet bag closed and started in the direction of the stage depot, "Come on Judge, let's go down to 'Frisco for awhile 'til this thing cools off."

The judge's face showed indica-

tions of agreement but he resolutely changed their direction and stamped across to O'Connell's Bar. After three good snorts of red-eye, he started up toward the reservoir. Peel, protesting, reluctantly followed. "Judge, don't do it. The last time something like this happened, you come awful close to gettin' lynched."

Able Cain nodded agreement but continued his steady pace toward the reservoir. "No man," he muttered, "ever goes so far as when he doesn't know where he's going."

"It don't make no difference how high you hang," Pike answered. "You're just as dead when they cut you down!" He was very near to being right when they arrived.

The men were being held at bay by the threat of the blacksmith's double barreled shotgun but Able Cain's arrival set them shouting like convicts when the warden appears to make a speech. "That's the one got us started on this crazy doin's!" shouted a miner. "That gun the smithy's holdin' is only got two shots; let's rush..."

"Wait!" Cain shouted, "There's a way to straighten this thing out! You got to have bosses and they got to be chosen fair and square. Now there's a way to do it and if'n the blacksmith takes his gun off'n you, will you hold still and leave each other alone until we can straighten her out?"

"There's a way to straighten her out quick!" shouted a Hill man. "Plug that danged judge and all go home!"

"Sure!" roared the judge. "You can do just that and then the first fire that hits close to Apex can burn her to the ground! Your women and children can burn up, along with your homes, and Apex will become just another forgotten ghost town 'cause the men off Plushbottom Hill and the men from lower town couldn't get along. Even Swede's Flat got itself a reservoir and they sure will rub it in if'n we can't get this one finished."

Silenced, the men thought that one over. "All right, Judge," shouted a man from the Hill, "we'll give her another try. But," he added, "we gotta figure who's bossin' an' who's diggin'."

"I'm willin' to work," yelped a lower town miner, "but anybody bossin' me is gonna have to have some qualifications besides livin' on Plushbottom Hill! How we gonna settle that, Stupid...er...I mean, Judge?"

"You all knock off and go have a drink," answered the judge. "I'll go back to town and we'll hold another drawing. We'll put all the names in the box and draw ten times. The men drawed, will act as stinkers...er... I mean, stingers. That fair? Suit everybody?"

THE CROWD muttered assent, the blacksmith cautiously lowered his gun and they all trooped back to town. The smithy joined Able Cain worriedly, "Thet ain't gonna work, Jedge. Yew can't pick men out'a hat to get work done! Yew pick some dunderhaid out'a a hat an' he'll have them men fightin' worse'n ever!" He paused, then morosely continued, "Much as this town needs protection against fires, we better give the idee up."

"Give up nothing," growled the judge. "California wasn't settled, and millions in gold taken out, by giving up. The Mormons never give up; now they're set. We can't give up; we got to overcome our problems." He looked at the tall, pine covered mountains and the bright white clouds floated over the far off peaks of the mighty Sierras. "No sir, we can't give up! We got to build for the future. What if'n that fellow Sierra give up? He had troubles with wild Indians that make our troubles look small, yet he helped civilize the country.

"But, you're right about getting the right men to head up the different gangs. I thought of making two gangs, one from the lower town and the other from off the Hill, but, that wouldn't end our problem. We gotta get the two groups together so's they'll work and respect each other in the future. The only way they'll do that, is to work together. Side by side. It's more than just

building a reservoir. It's to make loyal citizens out of all men, else we'll wind up just another ghost town. Folks that come later will follow the wagon tracks to a broken-down town called Apex. They'll see the weeds in the streets and the burnt out, broken-down homes and wonder what happened to the people that took the riches from its canyons then moved away to let it rot!" He tipped his hat over his eyes and strode on in silence. Peel and the smithy pondered his words and were startled when he let out a yell, "Is that gambler from 'Frisco still working over at the Faro Club?"

"Sure is," answered Pike Peel, "he's still usin' a woman dealer too. Got all the men from both ends of town hangin' around like bees about a honey pot. Kind of unusual for a woman dealin' cards. Man don't care much if'n he wins or loses. Game's on the level though, just house percentage. Gonna have her run the reservoir gang? Have to fight off'n..."

"Not the gang," said Cain, suddenly sounding confidently determined. "Just pick the names of the bosses out'a the box!"

"Figger she's lucky enough to pick all the best men?" asked the blacksmith incredulously.

"Yes-sir-ee, she'll pick 'em!" the judge said loudly, then added softly, "with a little help from me!"

The ballot box was again dragged out to the porch and the judge called to the belligerently gathered citizens, "You are all acquainted with Miss Belle. I've asked her to draw the names of the working bosses. Any objections?" The judge shifted his Navy Colt to easy reach and stared, stoney-eyed, at the crowd.

Miss Belle smiled upon the assemblage, and daintily reached into the box and withdrew a name. She handed it to Able Cain who, in a sonorous voice read, "Blewy Mullens!" The men from lower town cheered. The gambling lady drew again; and again came up with the name of a lower town man. The crowd silenced, groups began separating. She drew the fourth, fifth, and the sixth. Each time the lower town men yelped in amazed glee.

Finally, the drawing was over and Able Cain's voice was crackling amazement. Ten bosses were chosen and every one of the ten was a miner from lower town. Not a single ballot held the name of a man from Plushbottom Hill!

A silence deepened, until the Chinaboy cook could be heard banging pots in the hotel kitchen, then an angry voice shouted, "Somethin' mighty fishy goin' on! Betcha they ain't any of us Hill men in thet ballot box!" The protestor strode threateningly forward and snatched at the box.

The judge moved back, against the rough pine wall of the hotel, and spoke softly, "Jodd Leary, get away from that box! The drawing was fair and you're stuck with it!"

"If'n she was fair," growled Leary, "then nobody should feel hurt if'n I jest make sure!" He raised a booted foot and kicked at the ballot box. The judge in turn kicked at Leary and caught the angry man flush in the stomach

THE PORCH was narrow and the crowd backed against the rail to let the contestants have at it. Leary recovered from the kick and battered the judge against the wall with heavy fists, until the wall shook and his knees buckled. The judge clinched, and threw the miner to the floor, pounding his face with angry fists. Blood ran from the Hill man's nose and splattered the judge's elbows until, suddenly, the miner pulled him close and got a firm grip on the Judge's ear with strong teeth. Cain howled in pain and thrashed about until the two fighters rolled through the rail and thudded into the dust below.

The fall broke them apart and they lay, gasping, while the eager hands of the crowd helped them up and held them apart. The judge recovered first and climbed stiffly back to the balcony. He righted the box and addressed the citizens.

"There's right and wrong about every decision. Every act performed by a public official is debatable

but..." he drew to his full height, wiped the blood from his ear and blared, "...if'n that decision is honestly made, the character of the official should not be questioned! The good of the community is paramount in any decision made! Bring Leary up to the balcony."

The bleeding man was hoisted up and the judge held the ballot box high in the air, letting the ballots flutter onto the floor. Weakly, Leary grabbed a handful. He shuffled through the bits of paper and turned sheepishly to the expectant group, "They's on the level, every man from the Hill's got his name on one of these here ballots!" He turned to the judge, "I'm mighty sorry I doubted your honesty, Cain. Looks like we're goin' to be bossed by the men from Lower Town! To make it come out right, I'll buy the drinks for the whole danged bunch. O'Connell, get in there an' start pourin'!"

Weakly, the judge pushed himself away from the wall and joined the leaders in the rush for the bar.

NEXT MORNING, the digging was started in earnest and the judge and Pike Peel stood on the bank and watched the reservoir take shape. The several gangs were hard at it and the judge complacently nodded as the smithy came over. "Sure hittin' the ball, Judge. Them men Belle drew for bosses are the best in the country. They know how to give orders an' ain't afraid, or too proud, to git down an' sweat right along with the rest. No shoutin' orders or bawlin' about doin' it wrong. Jest danged fine men. Them Hill fellas is goin' along an', 'fore she's finished, may be showin' them lower town fella's the way home!"

The smithy grinned and shook his head, "Little different from yesterday. Judge, sometime when she's all over, will you tell me how you done it?"

"Done what?" asked the man in the frock coat. He snapped his suspenders with pleasure, gazing innocently at the smithy.

"How you got Belle to draw the names of the men you wanted for gang bosses! Don't go sayin' you didn't arrange it. Them fellas," he swung his arm over the diggings, "might not know somethin' was fishy but, I saw your face when Jodd kicked over that box. You looked like a man jest 'fore the hangin' rope is dropped over his head!"

Able Cain frowned and held his silence for several moments, then he grinned. "It come to me when I thought about them Mormons curing their meat in the Great Salt Lake. I ate a lot of that meat. Filled you up, and left a man with awful thirst, but, it got us across the Nevada Sinks alive!" He narrowed his eyes, "Ever notice a woman handle a piece of salt meat? She don't like the feel of the salt. Ever notice how fussy a gambler is about his hands? Gotta be just so. Think how a woman gambler would put her hand into a ballot box. She'd feel hesitant just reaching into a dark box, then she'd feel around for a smooth ballot. Right?"

The puzzled faces of Peel and the smithy stared intently at Able as he gazed over the hills. He continued. "Just for argument, say somebody dipped forty ballots in a strong salt solution, then dried them out. Then say that same somebody threw in ten ballots that wasn't salty and them last ten was sun-warmed nice just before they was thrown in the box. Wouldn't you expect a gambling lady to pick them nice, warm ballots instead of cold, rough, salt-sticky ones?"

The smithy picked up a rock and scaled it out into the dust. He watched the puff of red dirt rise in the windless air and remarked, "Ain't women the dangdest critters?"

GULCH CITY LOSES A CITIZEN

by Harold Gluck

"If you have any ideas of going for a vacation, it's going to be at the government's expense."

★ ★ ★

Jonathan Bradley was suspicious of this lawyer from the East, and he had reason to be. But the Boss of Gulch City figured that he could handle Mr. Howard Cooper, just as he'd handled other unwanted visitors!

★ ★ ★

JONATHAN BRADLEY puffed leisurely on his imported cigar. He was in no particular hurry to get back to Gulch City, and being the only passenger on the Stage Coach he could bide his time. Though fifty-five, he could easily pass for a much younger man. He was stocky—about five feet ten—with black hair that just was beginning to gray and he wore a

thick brown moustache. Ed Berson, the thin-faced station agent, came over to Bradley.

In his most apologetic manner he began, "Hope you won't mind, Mr. Bradley, but there's an extra passenger for this coach. Sorry you can't be alone; but it can't be helped, I guess. He stayed over yesterday. A bit ill. Didn't like the dried apple pie my wife made."

Bradley's eyes shifted to the side of the building. A man wearing a heavy double breasted Eastern kind of a coat and heavy dark store pants was approaching. But what caught Bradley's eyes was not the man. It was a silver-headed cane that was being carried under the right armpit. As the man came closer Bradley took in every detail about his face. The hazel eyes that were clear and steady. The face that was long and colorless and also close shaven. All in all the man definitely didn't belong in the West.

"Here you are," began Ed Berson. "Mr. Jonathan Bradley meet Mr. Howard Cooper."

The two men shook hands. "Hope you forgive me," said the younger man, who was somewhere in his late thirties, but I understand I am somewhat of an intruder. They tell me you like to have a coach all for yourself and you buy up all the tickets. May I have your permission to go with you?"

It was on Bradley's tongue to say, "Suppose I say no—then what?" but he never let the words pass his lips. The man who owned The Big Drink Cafe and ran Gulch City could recognize a gentleman, even if he were an Easterner.

"Since I have all the tickets, that means you can only come as my guest."

The best Concord coach on the Hockaday & Liggett line was making time. Sitting on the boot with his feet braced against the footboard was the driver, Jack Morrow. Tall, raw-boned, with a few notches on his gun, he was forcing his horses to their utmost. He knew there would be a good-sized tip if he could make a new speed record with Mr. Bradley as his passenger.

Inside, the two men sat facing each other.

"You might have trouble getting accomodations when we arrive," explained Jonathan Bradley. "Since the gold strike, space is at a premium. I also own the only decent hotel in town, so it would be a pleasure to have you as my personal guest."

"You are very courteous," replied Howard Cooper.

"It slipped my mind, but what business did you say you were in?" Bradley managed to slip in as the coach hit a bump in the road.

"Didn't say," was the reply. "However, it's no secret; I am an attorney from Kansas City. Have to take care of the affairs of a dead man." And then as though to avoid further discussions, he closed his eyes.

FOR THE next four hours the trip was eventful only in one respect. Not a single word was spoken as the coach continued on its journey. For Jonathan Bradley was worried. In his mind there was but one thought: Is this man coming to Gulch City to investigate the death of Joe Spivak, the peddler? Time and again, Jonathan told himself it just couldn't be. For as far as the town was concerned, the peddler had just gone off unannounced to other parts. And in the last two months there had been no deaths by accident—illness, or gunshot. The man was not telling the truth. Or perhaps he was.

The coach came to a grinding halt as the brake shoe pressed against the wheel. Jonathan stuck his head out of the window. "What's wrong, Jack?"

"Fallen tree ahead, Mr. Bradley," was the reply. "Guess I'll need a bit of help to move it before we can go ahead."

Without any invitation, Howard Cooper followed Bradley to the site of the fallen tree. "If you two take one end, and I the other, guess we can get it out of the way. If not, then I'll unhitch one of the horses and do it that way," suggested the driver.

"You can move the tree later," interrupted a fourth man, who stepped from behind the coach with a six-shooter in his right hand. He was masked, and his stetson was pulled down on his head to prevent any identification.

"Unhitch that gun belt of yours," he ordered the driver, "and don't go for your gun if you want to remain alive."

Jack Morrow was neither a coward nor a fool, so he followed instructions and his gun belt fell to the ground.

"If it's my money you want," said Bradley, "I have a wallet with five hundred dollars in my inner coat pocket. Take it, and let me proceed."

"I don't want your money," the masked man snapped back, "I just want your life. I happen to be a friend of Joe Spivak. Think you can fool me? When anyone gets in your way in this town, they just disappear. I don't know what Joe did to rile you. But this I know. I haven't heard from him. so that means he didn't go on business to some other place. You killed him and now you get it."

Beads of sweat started forming on Bradley's forehead. Then they began to trickle down his face. He was trembling and finally got control of himself. "Can't we talk this over?" he suggested. "You got me all wrong."

ALMOST IN the capacity of a disinterested spectator, Cooper watched the entire proceedings. He shifted his body slightly, and then his cane struck the masked man's hand. The gun fell to the ground. All went for it, but Cooper got it first. Jack got his gun, and from underneath his coat, Bradley produced a small derringer. "I'll kill you for what you did," shouted Bradley to the masked man.

"There will be no killing at all," replied Cooper. "This man is emotionally upset. He's no killer, himself; so I am giving him a chance to run for his life. And no shooting at him from either of you, or I'll do some shooting myself."

Bradley was again seated in the coach facing Cooper. The tree had been moved out of the way and the coach was making up for lost time.

"Don't think I'm not grateful to you for saving my life," began Bradley. "If I seem grouchy it's because I think you should have let me finish that fellow off. This way he'll only try again."

"You haven't much to worry about," Cooper pointed out, "because if he does try, we'll take care of him." The "We" wasn't lost on Bradley who smiled in return.

The coach pulled up in front of Bradley's place. Two of his men came out to greet their boss. "Jake, you take this gentleman's things and give him the corner room on the first floor!"

Jake followed his boss' order. Gulch City was seeing a bit of prosperity due to the recent finding of pay ore in the mountains. Of saloons, there were plenty—The Lone Star, The Bull's Head, The Longhorn, Golden Bit, and Bradley's place—The Big Drink Cafe.

When the last of the luggage had been removed from the coach, Bradley turned to the driver. "I ought to have you fired for falling for that tree stuff. You shouldn't be permitted to drive again if you endanger the safety of your passengers."

Jack Morrow said nothing; he just bit his lip. That meant he knew when to control his temper. Bradley went into his cafe. Cooper took a wallet from his pocket and gave the driver twenty dollars. "Thanks a lot; you're a real gentleman. Where can I find you, if I want to see you?" asked Cooper.

"I'll be here for the next three days. The other driver takes the coach back. Got a cabin on the side of Loco's Hill. Anyone will tell you how to get there. And a word of warning. Beware of Bradley. He's boss in this town and bad medicine. And he can open up your door and examine your stuff; just remember that."

LATE THAT evening, Howard Cooper walked by himself down the only main street of the town. A

drunken, unkempt man, of middle height, evidently unsteady on his feet, approached Cooper. "Could yer stake a man to the price of a drink in this town?"

Cooper smiled. Not a soul in listening distance. "What's up, Tod? Do you think the road-agent act you pulled was convincing?"

Tod Reilly grinned. "I think I dropped my gun too quickly when you used your cane. No doubt that Jonathan Bradley is our man; I watched every detail of his face. He sure knows about Joe Spivak. What's the next move?"

The two men continued walking for a short pace together. "I'm going to visit the driver. Trail me, and then later you can circulate around town and see what you can pick up. This Bradley is no fool—especially with the high stakes he's playing for."

Ten minutes later Cooper arrived at a tumbled-down cabin. There was a light in the window. He knocked twice on the door. "Come on in. Door's open," replied the voice inside.

Cooper entered and found himself facing Jack Morrow, who was seated at a table reading a two week old newspaper. "Take a seat," said the driver.

Cooper accepted the invitation. "What's on your mind?" asked Morrow.

"Can you tell me anything about a peddler called Joe Spivak?"

Before replying, Jack Morrow scrutinized the face of the man before him. "Seems to me I've seen your face before, Captain Cooper. It was at Fort Bridger. Watched the way you handled the fellows caught selling fire-water to the Indians. Sure, I'll tell you what you want to know about Joe Spivak. But just what's your interest in the affair?"

In reply, Cooper shoved his hand into his inside coat pocket. It came out with a wallet which he opened. On one side there was a badge, on the other his identification card. "So you're a Secret Service Man," acknowledged Cooper. "Something mighty important must be up for you to come here. Can you talk or is it that much of a secret?"

"If you keep your tongue tied," began Cooper, "you can know what it concerns. About two years ago, a set of plates for National Bank Notes—twenty dollar variety—vanished from the Mint. Such a thing has never happened before. Within the last year, bills have been turning up with serial numbers that show they sure were printed from those plates. We looked throughout the East for the source. Then we found they were coming from an area in which this town was located. Joe Spivak was sent here by the government in the disguise of a peddler. Gave him a good chance to wander about and see things. His last report said he was certain the bills were printed either in town or nearby. Then we heard no more from him. What do you know?"

The driver stroked his chin. "It was plain to me that Joe Spivak wasn't an ordinary peddler. You see, the thing that gave him away to me was a simple fact. He had his goods shipped to him by coach instead of freight wagon, and that meant he was selling his stuff at a loss. Maybe he was killed for the money he carried. Or maybe he did discover where they printed the stuff. And another thing—about that hold-up. I noticed the gun hit the ground before you hit him with your cane. He wasn't a real road-agent; otherwise, I would have gone for him myself. Just wanted to see what was going to happen."

"You're pretty observant and sharp," complimented Cooper. "It was staged, all right. Tod Reilly is working with me on this case. He was also with me in the army before we joined this new government service. If there is anything you learn, just let me know."

AS COOPER left the cabin, he was worried. If the driver could be that observant, then Bradley might have seen through the entire little game he was playing. Perhaps it might be best to try a different approach. He was about fifty

feet from the cabin when he stopped short. There was a shot—then another shot. A terrible scream pierced his ears.

"Over here," said a familiar voice, that of Tod. Cooper walked to a clump of bushes. A man was lying on the ground, with blood oozing from his mouth. In his hand was a six-shooter. And Tod was holding his gun. Before Cooper could ask any questions, he saw the driver at his side, with rifle in hand.

"Heard two shots. Anything go wrong?"

Tod pointed to the body on the ground. "This fellow started to follow you, Howard, soon after we left. He trailed you up to the cabin. He was near a window listening to what you two said. Then when you came out, he got ready to kill you. I was behind him. His first shot went wild, and—well—he never got a chance for a second. Who is he?"

Jack Morrow looked at the man. "Why he's Burt Landers, one of Bradley's boys. Must have sent him to take care of you in case he figured you were up to something. Well, what are you two going to do?"

Cooper frowned. Things were getting beyond his direction. "If this fellow doesn't turn up, then Bradley knows I am his man. I have to move fast, but just what can I do? Can't go back to the hotel; haven't got enough evidence of any kind to make an arrest."

"Maybe I can help," suggested Morrow. He moved the dying man to the stump of a tree and braced the body up against it. Then he bent down on one knee. "Look Burt, I'm Jack Morrow. Remember me? Drive the stagecoach. I won't fool you; these two fellows are government agents. Bradley sent you out to follow one. But did he forget to warn you about the other? Maybe he wanted to get rid of you. Your boss is printing money on a press somewhere. But where? Want to get even with him? Tell them where."

The dying man was making a supreme effort to speak. His face was twisted as though he were trying to hold off death just for a few minutes. "So...that's what Bradley did to me...right shaft in mine... big press...guard at mine...and..." That was all the man could say and then he slumped to the earth.

"What's the next move?" questioned Tod. "I guess we got to get to that mine. Can you take us there?"

Jack Morrow nodded his head. "I'll get some candles and a lamp from my cabin. And also a six-shooter; there may be fireworks."

AN HOUR later, the three men found themselves outside a high wooden fence guarding the entrance to the mine. "How do we get in?" asked Cooper.

"Leave it to me," said Jack Morrow. "Now you two get in the background while I knock on the door."

Jack found he had to rap loudly before the door opened.

An armed man look at him puzzled. "What brings you here at this time of the night?"

Jack pointed to his side and the man turned around. He brought the butt of his pistol down on the man's head. "Come on," he whispered. "This fellow will be asleep for some time."

With lighted candle the men walked cautiously along the mine shaft. They came to a heavy wooden door. "See if we can swing it," said Morrow. The three men put their weight against it. It opened and they entered. Inside was a large oil lamp. Cooper lit it and the men looked at a printing press and a table. There was a note on the table. As Cooper went for it the door slammed tight. Cooper opened the note and read:

You'll never get out of here alive. You can have the press as a present. Jonathan Bradley.

"We walked into it," moaned Tod. "Like three babes who hadn't an ounce of brains in their heads."

"Guess it's my fault, suggesting we come here," said Jack Morrow.

"Think we could shoot the door so it would open?" asked Tod.

"We can't do that, but we could blast it open if we have blasting powder. And we got the next best

thing in our guns. Come on, let's get the powder into the cracks and we can seal it with bits of handerchief; we can make a fuse from the wick of a candle. Give Bradley time to get out of the mine and then we'll blow the door."

JAKE MOSTELL watched his boss pack a bag. "Why do we have to leave town, Mr. Bradley? Those three fellows are sealed for good in the mine; they can't ever talk."

"If the government worried over Joe Spivak when we buried him so no one could find him, what will they do when two of their men are missing? No, we can't stay here. There comes a time in a man's life when he must know he's got to quit. I got enough out of those plates to last a life time. So goodby to this town."

There was a knock on the door. "Go answer it, Jake," said Bradley. As the door opened, the muzzle of a six-shooter came poking through. "If you have any ideas of going for a vacation, it's going to be at the government's expense. And not for long—because there is also going to be a trial for murder in federal court."

Bradley went for his gun. Cooper pulled the trigger once and Bradley shouted, "I'm dying."

"Don't think so," said Tod, "you only got a flesh wound."

Jack Morrow said farewell to the two men. "There's some reward money coming to you, Jack," said Cooper. "It will be in four figures and it ought to come in handy if you want to do a bit of prospecting on your own or buy a ranch. Thanks for everything, and perhaps we'll meet again some time in the future."

Jack smiled, waved to the men as the coach they had entered started on its way back East. Perhaps it was time for him to settle down.

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Mary had sided Curt in many tight spots.

NEVER CROWD A TIGER

It's a fatal mistake to count a lawdog out when he's down!

A BROKEN beaten man alighted slowly from the train which stopped at the little cow-town of Maverick. Sunken, lusterless eyes glowed briefly when a sweet-faced woman, dressed in the white uniform of a nurse, put her arms around him.

"Welcome home, Curt," Mary Lawton whispered, and she kissed him full on the lips. "I'll nurse you back to health," she promised. Her eyes

A Story Of Courage by Chuck Martin

clouded with tears as she saw what five years in prison had done to the man she loved.

"It's good to be with you again, Mary," Curt Lawton answered weakly. "I don't deserve you, but you're the best wife a man ever had!"

Mary Lawton took his arm and led him up the dusty street. She avoided the main thoroughfare, angling off on a side street until they reached a small white cottage which faced the low green hills to the east.

A dour-faced man who wore a badge on his vest was waiting on the front porch of the little cottage. Long cowhorn mustaches framed his thin lips, and he made no attempt to conceal the sneer of intense dislike on his bony face.

"I see you've shed your tiger-stripes," he greeted Curt Lawton. "Just thought I'd warn you that I'll be watching you mighty close. The first mistake you make, you'll be back wearing those stripes!"

Curt Lawton lowered his eyes. He nodded slowly as he clutched the porch-rail for support. "Like you said, Sheriff Wirth," he answered. from the side of his mouth.

Mary Lawton flushed, and faced the sheriff with flashing brown eyes. "Get off my property, you hulking bully!" she cried angrily. "You wouldn't have dared talk that way to Curt five years ago and every one in town knows it!"

"I'm the law, lady," Wirth said harshly. "This stumble-bum was convicted of armed robbery, and he should have gotten life. Once a tiger, always a tiger. The town won't feel safe until he is back in prison!"

Curt Lawton kept his head lowered as he swayed with weakness. Mary Lawton faced the sheriff and pointed to the street.

"Get, you contemptible beast!" she lashed at him. "Or I swear I'll get Curt's old law-gun and kill you!"

Cal Wirth glared, but he quickly left the little porch. Curt Lawton sank down into a big chair, and Mary covered him with an old buffalo rug. It was one of the last of its kind, just as Curt Lawton had been one of the last of the old-time peace-officers in a West which had changed too fast.

"You will have to rest a long time. Curt," Mary told her husband gently. "I know you did not rob the bank, and some day we will prove it!"

Curt Lawton made no answer. His mind was numb from five years in prison; his wasted body was in no better condition. Mary watched him for a moment, and spoke softly.

"The spark of courage is still there, Curt," she whispered. "Nothing else matters right now!"

CURT LAWTON sat immoveable in the life-giving sun, on the little front porch. The gaunt, wasted man stiffened under the old buffalo robe as he stared at the distant green hills with eyes that were both bitter and wistful. His head bobbed, and his trembling hands fluttered weakly as he tried to erase the memory of those five terrible years that had shut him away from the sun.

The jute-mill and rock-pile had not been as bad as the whispered jibes of men Curt Lawton had captured and sent there, before he had surrendered his law-guns. He had been the sheriff of Maverick County, but that was before the stolen money from the bank had been found in his house.

Only Mary had believed in his innocence, and Mary had worked as a nurse in the little hospital during his absence. Mary had waited; she had also given Curt Lawton his orders.

Lawton pushed the robe aside and tottered to his feet. His teeth chattered until he clenched his trembling hands. Sweat poured from his bony face that was beginning to lose some of the prison pallor, after two weeks of sitting in the sun.

Three times around the yard every day, Mary had ordered. Lawton began the staggering march like a horse which has run its heart out. His breath was whistling from bloodless lips as he finished the ordeal, and sank exhausted into the heavy chair. It was an hour before he moved again.

He stared at the cool green hills until hope was born again in his sunken eyes. Lawton was like an old man in dotage when he once more pushed erect and tottered across the little back street. He shuffled his worn boots along a grass-grown walk that made a short-cut to the County road leading back to the foothills.

Lawton was resting behind a jutting rock at the top of the grade when two men drove up the hill in a buggy, behind a spanking team of trotters. Dale Wade, the driver, stopped to blow the team not more than twenty yards away. Wade was the banker of Maverick. His voice drifted down-wind to the weary ex-convict.

"That old stumble-bum used to be sheriff here until my bank was robbed a little more than five years ago," Wade told his companion. "Lawton took two thousand dollars to let the other robbers escape, and the money was found in his house!"

Lawton closed his eyes and tried to stop the incessant tremble of his hands. He had been thirty-two years old the night the bank had been robbed. Now he was like a man of seventy-past. He tried to stop the bobbing of his head as the banker's sneering voice came down the wind to him again.

"A guilty conscience made him what he is today. His wife is a nurse down at the hospital. She still believes in that crooked old stumble-bum!"

Lawton opened his eyes when the buggy rattled away toward town. He pushed erect and started for the green hills, and his dragging boots raised little whirls of dust until weariness again forced him to rest.

The sun beat down and dried the sweat on his thin, bony face. A cool wind ruffled his tousled gray hair. A numbness again settled down over him; a numbness of both body and mind.

He did not turn his head when a cow-chain clanked in the pasture behind him. He jerked slightly when a pair of gnarled old hands gripped his shoulders and shook him slightly. A kindly voice, mellowed with age, came to him faintly. Lawton slowly opened his eyes.

"Curt, old pard! You're *walking* again, feller!"

Lawton could endure the sneers of his fellows, but a mist scalded his gray eyes when old Ben Walters gave him both affection and understanding.

"I knew you'd come back to the hills one day, Curt," Walters continued happily. "I saw you sitting under that old buffalo-robe, a-gathering up yore strength!"

Lawton pushed up to a sitting position, and sucked in a deep draft of pungent sage. His hands trembled as he tried to roll a smoke. The old cattleman twisted a quirly and placed it between the fluttering lips. He cupped a flaming match between his palms and fired Lawton's smoke.

"I had to come," Lawton said weakly. "If I only had a horse to ride..."?

Ben Walters stepped behind the palsied man as he knuckled a tear from his faded eyes. "I knew it, Curt," he said huskily. "Coming right up with two saddled horses. I'll stake the cow out again, and get the horses from the barn."

Lawton snuffed out his cigarette, and sank back on the grass. He was out under the sun again, with the wind blowing in his face. Lying on the ground that somehow never changed, and for the first time in years, he knew what it was to rest.

He shuddered slightly as he tallied the costs of those five years behind cold prison walls. The clank of leg-irons echoed in his ears, mingling with the measured tread of the hated lockstep.

HOOFS THUDDED on the grass and stopped just behind him. Strong hands raised Curt Lawton to his feet and boosted him up to a scarred saddle. Weathered leather that fitted a man's legs, and added to his comfort. With rain-roughened whangs in his left hand to start the blood pulsing through wasted stringy muscles.

"A feller can ride a horse when he can't even walk," Ben Walters

growled softly. "Me and you is going to ride every day, Curt. You'll get back your strength, and you'll be a man again!"

"Stumble-bum," Lawton said, and then he turned his head to listen. That strong vibrant voice could not be his, and he spoke again to reassure himself. It seemed to Curt Lawton that he was somehow free of the accumulated bitterness that had broken him in both mind and body.

"Calf roundup starts in another month," Ben Walters said with a smile. "There's a job on the Lazy W for you whenever you want it, Curt. Back there in the green hills aways."

Curt Lawton stared with wonder in his puckered gray eyes. A riding job for a stumble-bum. After five years in prison where he had been only a number?

Lawton stared down at his shaking hands. He slumped down in the saddle without strength enough to neck-rein the horse. But there was a new hope in his sunken eyes. It took all his will-power to shake his head side-wise, instead of that up-and-down bobbing.

"Thanks, Ben," he murmured gratefully. "To sit a horse once more..." and he almost toppled from the saddle. "We better be getting back again."

Ben Walters checked his horse and fell in behind. His teeth almost met on the fist he pressed against his mouth to stop the words of pity that sought expression against the old cattleman's lips. Pity that would have robbed Curt Lawton of his last bit of resistance.

"I reckon we better," he agreed quietly. "We've only come a mile, but it will do for a start."

He kneed his horse gently to shoulder Lawton's mount into a turn as he glanced at the helpless, shaking hands. Walters kept to the grasslands to avoid the road where some passerby might see Curt Lawton in the saddle. It would be something for fair-weather friends to laugh about. The face of old Ben Walters pinched in like a craggy shoulder of weathered granite.

THEY HAD done this thing to the man who had made Maverick a safe place for women and children. To the man who had carried the law-star for five years against the lawless gun-fighters of the owl-hoot clan. Notorious names that were now numbers in the prison that had made Curt Lawton a shaken, broken wreck of a man.

Ben Walters remembered that in all those five years, Curt Lawton had killed only one man. That had been the night when Mary and Curt had been married, and Tom Wade had called for a showdown in a fit of jealous rage. Curt Lawton had taken a bullet through the shoulder before he realized that Wade meant to kill him, and Lawton had fired only one shot.

Ben Walters shook his head. Tom Wade had been the only brother to the banker who had spoken so disparagingly of Curt Lawton. When the Maverick bank had been robbed of ten thousand dollars, some one had tipped off Cal Wirth, the deputy sheriff. Wirth had searched Curt Lawton's house. Mary had been nursing at the hospital, and Curt had been serving papers on a rancher back in the hills.

Cal Wirth had arrested his superior after finding two thousand dollars in the bottom drawer of a dresser, in the little house Curt Lawton had built for his bride. Five long years in prison!

Ben Walters held his horse to a walk as he watched the face of his friend. Curt Lawton sat his horse like a man almost asleep, but some of the hard lines had fallen away from his mouth. There was utter weariness in every line of his gaunt frame that swayed automatically to meet the movements of the horse under him.

"We better stop here, Curt," Walters suggested slowly. "It's a matter of a quarter of a mile to your house, and we don't want folks to see you riding just yet. You'll be a different man in a month of riding out under the sun!"

Lawton opened his eyes and took his bearings. They were at the beginning of the little path that cut

across lots, and Lawton slid from the saddle and almost fell. Ben Walters acted as if he had not noticed. He caught the bridle-reins with his left hand, and cantered back to the country road.

Curt Lawton shuffled his boots and started up the weed-choked path. Three times he sank to the ground and waited until enough strength came to carry him toward his objective. He dropped at last into the big chair on the little porch, and pulled the old buffalo robe around him.

The weary man stared at his long bony hands with wonder in his gray eyes. Hands that showed only a trace of trembling because of utter exhaustion. The improvement was due to the sun, the wind, and the clean fresh air. And to the loyalty of two friends who believed in him.

CURT LAWTON no longer staggered as he shuffled along the path that led to the big chair on his little porch. Mary always came home a. five to cook supper. Lawton glanced down the street toward the hospital before he crossed the dusty street. He was pulling the old robe up about his shoulders when he had the feeling that he was being watched.

His hands began to tremble again with excitement. No other house stood in the same block with his, and Lawton raised his bobbing head to stare at the distant hospital. No white-clad nurse on the cool green lawn to wave at him, but the feeling persisted that he was being watched. He turned slowly and saw Mary standing in the doorway behind him.

For a long moment Curt Lawton did not speak. Only his bobbing head and trembling hands kept up their perpetual motion while he tried to find words. His eyes scanned Mary's face, and found no trace of pity. Only a great joy that told him of a faith that had been realized.

Curt Lawton smiled crookedly with facial muscles which had not smiled for more than five years. Mary came out on the porch to sit on the arm of his chair.

"I knew you'd get well, and walk again, Curt," she told him proudly, and her throaty voice was like an earnest prayer. "You've been riding with Ben Walters."

Curt Lawton glowed under the gentle touch of her strong hands, and then he came out from under the robe. The old beaten look of helplessness was gone when he stiffened his neck to stop the bobbing of his head. A different light glowed in his gray eyes as he smiled at Mary, and then his head and hands became still.

"Look, Mary," he whispered. "Almost as steady as yours!"

There was incredulous wonder in his deep voice as though he had just made the discovery. Mary Lawton caught his hands and hugged them to her breast as she winked back the tears of happiness. She turned quickly when a boot scraped on the walk, and Curt Lawton dropped his head after one glance at the intruder.

"Sheriff Wirth," Mary said, and Lawton set his teeth when her gentle voice trembled. "Was there something you wanted, Sheriff?"

"I'm watching you, Lawton," the officer stated bluntly. "I noticed you were on your feet again, and you better not try any of your old tricks. You know what it's like up at the Big House!"

Curt Lawton tried to stop the trembling of his big hands, and failed. His gray head was bobbing again when he straightened his stooped shoulders. For a moment he locked glances with the sheriff, and then his eyes wavered and fell before the open contempt in the big man's florid face.

"I know," Lawton murmured wearily. "I ought to know after five years of hell," and his husky voice was freighted with the torment of memories. "Yeah, I know what it's like up there," he repeated. "I was a tiger with stripes but don't ever crowd a tiger, Wirth!"

Mary Lawton saw the cowhorn mustaches twitch below the sheriff's long nose. She saw the big hands knot into fists while Curt Lawton stared down at his own shaking

hands. Even Mary was unprepared for the sudden and vicious attack.

A LONG ARM whipped out and caught Lawton behind the neck. He was jerked suddenly forward to meet the driving fist that pistoned out like a club. The blow struck Lawton in the mouth with brutal force, and Wirth stepped away to let the unconscious man drop to the floor.

Mary Lawton leaped forward and dragged her husband back to prevent him from tumbling from the porch. Her brown eyes were blazing as she straightened up to face the scowling sheriff. Her mouth was set in a straight line when her voice hissed against tightly clenched teeth.

"You've killed him, Cal Wirth! You hit Curt because you knew he could not defend himself. I'm going into the house to get his old law-gun. Then I'm coming out to kill you!"

Mary ran into the house, and reached for an old single-action Colt six-shooter that hung in a holster from a deer-head. The echo of running feet came faintly to her ears, and the street was deserted when she came out of the house empty-handed.

Mary Lawton's brown eyes widened when she saw Curt Lawton crawling toward the old chair on hands and knees. His gaunt face had filled out more than she had realized, and she watched while he licked a trickle of blood from his battered lips. By some peculiar change of emotion, the taste of his own blood had done something to Curt Lawton.

The beaten look was gone from his gray eyes as he raised his head and smiled at Mary. Now his head was steady and well poised. There was no tremble in the long-fingered hands that had turned to a healthy brown from riding out under the sun with old Ben Walters.

"Curt!" she cried joyfully, as she knelt beside him. "I thought you were...?"

"I owe Wirth something for waking me up," Lawton said thoughtfully. "It's like this, Mary. Five years of being slapped around by men who had all the advantages. Where you were thrown into solitary if you talked straight out, instead of whispering from the side of your mouth. Slaving in that damn jute-mill, and then coming back to my own town where I used to be the law. Folks sneering at me, and calling me a thief!"

Mary Lawton sensed the startling change. She knew that a man was being re-born, and she remained silent while her hand gripped his with understanding. Watching while Curt Lawton fought his battle of readjustment, and came to a decision.

"Sheriff Wirth," he said quietly. "The man isn't crooked, Mary. He's just weak, is all. Dale Wade owns him, body and soul!"

The red sun slanted down behind the foothills. The still peace of the afterglow brought a hush to birds and insects. The lush of twilight moved in so imperceptibly that it was upon them before they had even noticed its coming. And under the spell, Curt Lawton completed his rebirth, and shed the burden of the wasted years.

The hard lines of bitterness fell away from his jaw, and softened the stern set of his lips. His gray eyes were smiling until he chanced to glance down at his hands. Those palsied hands that had shaken incessantly for more than a year. Steady as rocks now, with the essence of sun...saddle-leather, and loyal friendship, making them strong again.

"Look, Mary," he whispered, and held out his right hand. "I felt the call of the hills one day, and out there under the sun, I found old Ben Walters. I wanted to be back in the saddle again. To feel a good cow-horse between my knees. I wanted the wind to blow in my face, to blow the cobwebs away. Most of all, I wanted just *one* man to trust me!"

"You are honest and fine, and some day you will prove it," Mary told him proudly. "Now let's just sit here a while and enjoy the peace of the twilight hour!"

CURT LAWTON rested with his head against Mary's soft shoulder. Then the sun was gone, and the shadows began to deepen. Lawton leaned forward suddenly and raised his head in warning as he keened the still air to listen.

A soft, sliding sound seemed to come from inside the little house. There was no scrape of boots as Lawton moved toward the front door in a crouch. He opened the door slowly, leaped inside like a tree-cat making a kill. Mary repressed a startled scream when heavy bodies thudded to the carpeted floor.

Inside the front room, Curt Lawton had a man down on the floor. A tall powerful fellow with the crossed gunbelts of the two-gunman strapped around his lean hips. The intruder was gripping a six-shooter with his right hand, but Lawton was holding the hammer down with the crotch of his left thumb. His right fist slashed through the murky gloom, and thudded loudly against the gunman's lean jaw. Mary stifled a low moan when she saw the expression on her husband's fighting face.

That face was craggy and hard, and ridged with writhing muscles. Gray eyes were cold as glare ice when Lawton twitched the gun loose and reached for a throttling grip. His sinewy fingers closed down and locked hard on the intruder's throat, while shoulder muscles hunched in to provide a terrible leverage.

Mary Lawton knew what would happen unless something stopped the crushing force that would snap brittle vertebrae like straws. Something had slipped in Lawton's tortured brain; something that had brought back all the pent-up bitterness of the past.

Mary leaped forward like a panther, and slapped her husband a stinging blow on his battered lips. She moaned softly when a cut opened to start the bleeding again. She waited breathlessly, and watched with staring eyes as Lawton licked his lips automatically.

The long-fingered hands jerked and ceased to squeeze. Powerful shoulder muscles relaxed and slabbed back into their sheaths. Curt Lawton shook his head violently and levered up to his feet. Now his breathing was calm and regular as he stared down at the mottled face on the floor, while the salty trickle of his blood restored his reason.

Lawton glanced at his old lawguns hanging from the antlers. He reached up and took a pair of handcuffs from a pouch behind the shell-studded belt, and he manacled the unconscious man with the expertness of long practise. Mary swayed against him as the weakness of reaction robbed her of strength.

"Curt!" she sobbed, and held him close. "Look at the money in the drawer!"

Lawton nodded as he stared at the open drawer. A money-sack was in the same place where the law had found the two thousand dollars...at a time when the world had seemed very young. Lawton's hands soothed Mary gently, and restored her composure.

"It's another frame-up, Mary," he murmured softly. "But this time we are both in the house. We should have visitors soon!"

"That man's face looks familiar," Mary whispered.

"That's one of my old pards," Lawton answered, a trace of bitterness in his deep voice. "Curly Fulton was one of the bandits who robbed the Maverick bank when I was sheriff!"

He pushed Mary aside when Fulton stirred and struggled to a sitting position. Fulton tore at the handcuffs that held his wrists securely behind his broad back. Then he saw Lawton watching him with a grim set smile. Fulton shuddered when Lawton glanced at the money-sack in the bottom dresser drawer.

Lawton said softly: "Talk, Fulton. Who sent you?"

"My face is on a thousand Wanted Posters," the outlaw muttered sullenly. "It means a twenty-year rap if you turn me in!"

CURT LAWTON stared without winking. The years fell away from him as his stooped shoulders

began to straighten slowly. His head nodded agreement, but his voice was gentle as he hunkered down on his boot-heels beside the prisoner.

"It's hell up there in prison, Curly," he said simply. "I ought to know. You could get ten years off if you turned State's evidence!"

Curly Fulton whispered hoarsely: *"Ten years!"*

"You and Pat Malone," Lawton continued suggestively. "You robbed Dale Wade's bank. Today you two held up the stage!"

"Damn him!" Fulton burst out savagely. "We never did. Wade did both jobs lone-handed. I won't take the rap for that sneaking killer!"

Fulton seemed to sag as his eyes closed. He was seeing the long lines of marching men behind grim gray prison walls. Curt Lawton waited in silence. Fulton snapped his eyes open as a cascade of words tumbled from his battered lips.

"Nearly six years ago!" he blurted. "Dale Wade gambled and lost ten thousand dollars. He wanted to get square with you for killing his worthless brother. Pat Malone and I were on the dodge, and we were hiding on the Wade ranch. Dale Wade robbed his own bank, and you know the rest!"

Curt Lawton nodded slowly and clenched his big hands. "I know the rest," he agreed hoarsely. "It was you who came here while Mary and I were both working. You hid that two thousand dollars in that bottom drawer, just like you did tonight!"

Curly Fulton strained against the handcuffs as terror made his dark eyes bulge. He was seeing the same things which had broken Curt Lawton. Breaking down mentally and physically under the pictures of his own imagination. Lawton spoke quietly.

"Get hold of yourself, Fulton. You won't stretch a rope if you come clean!"

"The rope?" Fulton whispered, and he shuddered violently. "When your fingers vised down on my throat...?"

"The posters say that you and Pat Malone killed a deputy marshal," Lawton reminded. "Shot him in the back on a sneak!"

Curly Fulton leaned forward. His hoarse voice was a gasping whisper as he talked to escape from the horrors of repression. While his hands shook like a man with the palsy, to rattle the handcuffs behind his back.

"That marshal caught Pat Malone one day out on the Wade ranch," Fulton confessed. "He was taking Pat to jail; said he would have you out of prison within a week!"

The murky twilight deepened with the still hush that comes between sundown and dark, on moonless nights. There was stark horror in the staring eyes of Curly Fulton as he panted for breath. While the soothing balm of peace eased the lines of age and bitterness from the face of Curt Lawton.

"Dale Wade saw the marshal talking to Pat Malone," Fulton continued, and now his voice was muted. "He heard the marshal say he was taking Pat to jail. I was behind a cactus thicket with Wade, and Pat was giving up head, and telling all he knew!"

"The marshal was killed by a rifle slug," Lawton said tonelessly. "Winchester forty-five-seventy!"

"Dale Wade shot the marshal with my rifle," Fulton answered jerkily. "And I was already on the dodge!"

Curt Lawton took the neckerchief from the outlaw's throat. "Visitors coming, and I'm gagging you, Fulton," he whispered. "If you make a sound before I give the word, I won't raise a hand to save you from the rope!"

SHERIFF CAL WIRTH stopped his horse in front of the little house, and dismounted heavily. Curt Lawton sat on the porch with the old buffalo robe pulled up around his shoulders. A dim lamp was turned low in the front room behind Lawton, who leaned back in the big chair...waiting.

Wirth stepped up on the little porch with his right hand on his holstered six-shooter.

"You're under arrest, Lawton!" he said gruffly. "For robbing the stage this afternoon. Seems like you didn't

have enough of the Big House!"

Lawton staggered to his feet with both shaking hands upraised. Then he moved with the sudden and unexpected speed of heat lightning. His left hand whipped down to hold the sheriff's pistol in leather, while his right fist lashed out to thud against Wirth's jaw like an oaken maul. Lawton pulled his punch just enough to save the officer from a black-out.

Cal Wirth sagged forward as his knees buckled. Lawton took the captured six-shooter and stuck it down in the band of his wool pants. He steadied Wirth and pushed him into the living room through the open door. Then he waited until the sheriff saw the handcuffed prisoner.

"Curly Fulton!" Wirth gasped. "Wanted for robbery and murder!"

"You could be wrong," Lawton suggested quietly, and a smile twitched the corners of his mouth as the sheriff stared at the money-sack in the lower dresser drawer. "Is that the evidence you expected to find here?" Lawton asked sternly.

"That's part of the stage loot!" Wirth shouted. "Just like Dale Wade told me!"

"Dale Wade put you in office, Wirth," Lawton said grimly. "I thought at first you were crooked," and Lawton shook his head negatively. "You're not crooked, Cal," he continued slowly. "You just lack for backbone, and you don't have any salt in your blood!"

Cal Wirth tried to stop the trembling of his big hands. His eyes failed to meet the steady accusing gaze of Curt Lawton. He turned his head to stare down at Curly Fulton.

"You murdered deputy marshal Tom Slade!" Wirth accused the prisoner harshly. "I found your Winchester, and matched it with the murder slug!"

"Did Dale Wade bring you the rifle?" Lawton asked slowly.

Wirth nodded. "He brought me the rifle, but what's Fulton doing here in your house?" he asked hoarsely.

"Dale Wade sent him here to plant that money-sack," Lawton growled. "Wade held up the stage, and it was him who killed Tom Slade!"

"You've got to get him, Sher'ff!" Curly Fulton whispered hoarsely. "Wade and Pat Malone are fixing to rob the bank tonight!"

SHERIFF WIRTH jerked around with the color draining from his florid face when a heavy tread sounded on the porch floor. He sighed with relief when Ben Walters pushed into the room with a cocked six-shooter cradled in his horny palm. The old cattleman walked right up to Wirth and ripped the ball-pointed star from the big man's vest.

"I was out there listening," Walter's said 'savagely. "You hulking lump of jelly!"

Cal Wirth lost inches of stature as his wide shoulders began to sag. His face turned gray as his heavy jowls quivered like the wattles of a beaten rooster. Curt Lawton turned his head to shut out the sight of abject cowardice. Mary came close and gripped his left hand.

"I'm turning in my resignation," Lawton heard Wirth mutter. "Effective at once!"

Ben Walters growled like a bear as he slapped the big man with the flat of his hand. "I ought to kill you!" he said, with unconcealed contempt. "With outlaws robbing the bank, you turn in your star. Right now we need a strong man to preserve law and order, and your breed of skunk broke the only one Maverick ever had!"

"I don't believe so," a soft voice contradicted Walters. "You might look around, and perhaps change you mind!"

There was a mixture of love and pride in Mary's throaty voice. A faith that had endured, and had not grown less with the passing of the long years.

Ben Walters jerked up his shaggy head and stared at Mary Lawton. He shifted his eyes to follow her gaze, and drew a long breath as he met the steady gray eyes of Curt Lawton.

"Your shoulders ain't stooped no more, pard," the old cattleman whis-

pered joyously. "Your head don't bob up and down, and there ain't the sign of a tremble in your hands. Curt?"

"Yeah, Ben," Lawton said quietly. "Something on your mind?"

"You've got to do it, Curt," Walters stated earnestly. You made Maverick safe for women and kids once before, and now we don't have a sheriff. Two innocent men are working down there at the bank, and it is about to be robbed again!"

Curt Lawton stared down at his steady brown hands. He raised his head to study his old law-guns hanging from the antlers.

Mary Lawton reached for the old belts which now held glittering new shells. Cartridges she had put there on the day Curt Lawton had taken his first horse-back ride, after returning from prison. She passed them around her husband's lean hips and fastened the buckles; pushed back a step to look deep in his eyes.

"You said you would make the folks in Maverick change their minds," she reminded Lawton soberly. "If Ben will pin that old badge on your vest...?"

The old cattleman crossed the room in two long strides. He fastened the star over the left pocket of Curt Lawton's worn vest, and

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murmured the oath of office as Lawton raised his right hand.

"As one of the town trustees, I now appoint you as acting-sheriff," Walters said gruffly. "You know what to do, Curt!"

Lawton took a small key from his pocket, and leaned over the prisoner. He clicked the handcuffs loose, helped Curly Fulton to his feet, and pointed to the door.

"I know what it does to a man when he's framed into prison for something he never did," Lawton said grimly. "So I'm turning you loose, Curly. Hit saddle-leather and get long gone. Don't come back to Maverick as long as I'm acting-sheriff!"

TWO SADDLED horses were rein-tied in the shadows of an alley behind the bank. Curt Lawton slipped noiselessly through the darkness, pausing at the back door to listen. A husky throbbing voice was pleading desperately just inside the big room.

"Don't shoot, Dale! I won't do any talking!"

Lawton pushed the door open a crack, widened it, and slid in like a shadow. Dale Wade was holding another masked man under his cocked six-shooter. The banker's eyes glittered behind the mask which covered his face almost to the chin.

"You've talked too much already," Wade said grimly. "You talked to that deputy marshal, and Curly Fulton will get the same thing I'm giving you!"

"You can't do this, Wade," Pat Malone argued desperately. "You wounded one of those two men locked in the back room. I'll get out of town, and I'll never come back. You can keep all the money!"

Curt Lawton felt the blood pulsing at the ends of his long sensitive fingers. He was working again behind a law-star; he could kill the man who had robbed him of five years of life, and his good name. Lawton drew his six-shooter, and spoke softly.

"Don't move, Wade!" he said sternly. "The law speaking, and you are under arrest!"

Dale Wade whirled like a cornered wolf. He chopped a shot at the voice which was like the knell of doom.

Curt Lawton had side-stepped as he had finished his brief speech. His six-shooter roared to echo the explosion of Wade's gun, and the banker was slapped into a turn as the smoking pistol was battered from his right hand. Lawton stood over the robber with his law-gun ready for a follow-up. Dale Wade was on his knees, retching violently from bullet-shock.

"I'm taking you for robbery, Dale Wade," Lawton said sternly. "That means twenty years in the same prison where you sent me on a frame!"

"I'd rather be dead," the wounded man moaned. "Why didn't you kill me?"

Lawton shrugged his wide shoulders. "I'm not a killer," he replied tonelessly. "I only killed one man in my life, and he shot me first!"

"Twenty years," Wade whispered. "I won't serve it!" he screamed. "I killed deputy marshal Tom Slade!"

"Tell it to the judge, and squeal on yourself," Lawton answered coldly. "When you get enough of what I went through behind the walls of the Big House. Mebbe that away you can put a noose around your own neck. Right now I'm taking you to jail, and I'll send a doctor up from the hospital!"

"How about me?" Pat Malone asked slowly. "I'll plead guilty to armed robbery!"

"That's right," Lawton agreed curtly.

"I won't wear those stripes long," Wade said defiantly.

"You will wear them long enough to learn that it never pays to crowd a tiger!" Lawton answered bluntly. "Outside with both of you!"

Curt Lawton finished his law duties at the jail, and started for the little house where Mary and Ben Walters waited. He felt vibrantly alive as he trod the old familiar short-cut. Election was only six weeks away, and the tiger would change again...to the law-dog.

●

Thieves' Gun-Honor

Nothing could bring Tom Jackson back to life, but Martha could wait . . . and clear his name at last, when the time came.

by C. C. Staples

Jenny Jackson was the idol of all the cowhands in town.

TOM JACKSON, Martha's husband, was dead, killed on the steps of the Cattleman's Bank by a slug from a Colt forty-five.

The utter, sudden finality of it all, the disgrace that hung over Tom's name; that was what had Martha heartsick. But no one would ever get the belief out of Martha Jackson's mind that Tom had been murdered to cover up someone else's crime, even though most of the people in Two Arrows thought otherwise, believed he had been shot while robbing the Cattleman's Bank.

Even when slick, well-dressed Bill Reed and his partner, Jude, had sworn that they saw two men rush from the bank, pause on the porch, argue briefly, and that the other man had drawn and fired, then rode away leaving Tom Jackson dead; even then, she refused to believe their story. Reed and Jude both said that they had not recognized the other man in the darkness.

And now, as time dulled the keen edge of her grief, her mind set itself in dogged determination to ferret out the real robbers, uncover Tom's murderer, clear his name.

Martha was a slender, still young and beautiful woman of medium height and before that terrible night when Tom had been found dead, shot, in front of the bank, she had had a ready smile and a helping hand for everybody in Two Arrows, great and small alike. The people of the growing little Arizona cow town had sworn by her for her many acts of kindness. But now, her blue eyes smiled less easily and she seemed preoccupied with the weight of her keen sorrow, most of the time.

However, Martha Jackson had to go on living, supporting her young daughter. She turned to the only thing she knew, opened a dressmaking shop with living quarters in the rear, on Two Arrows' main street, and late in the afternoon on this hot day, her sewing machine was humming steadily as she worked on a red dress for Tottie Edgren, a dance hall girl from the Palace.

Tottie, sitting by the window in the little dress making shop, was leaning back at ease in a big chair, rolling and smoking one cigarette after another as the dressmaker worked on her gown. She was tall and willowy, and had a mop of blonde hair that showed a line of darker color near the roots. But her hard, wise brown eyes could soften

with startling suddenness, on occasion. Her gaze was on the street as the sun set, the desert breeze freshened and men and women started to roam the plank sidewalks.

SUDDENLY as she sat watching people pass she sniffed, jerked her head toward the street. Martha Jackson looked up. She saw Bill Reed, well dressed and immaculate as always, stroll by with her young daughter Jenny. The girl was blue-eyed, slender and pretty. She had the glossy black hair of her mother. Reed was gazing down at her, saying something in a low, intimate tone. Jenny laughed shyly and threw a quick, apprehensive glance at the window of her mother's dressmaking shop. Tottie drew back behind the curtains quickly, her teeth clenched, a bitter sneer on her rather pretty face.

Martha Jackson's brow creased in a worried frown. As if Tom's death wasn't enough burden for her to bear... Jenny taking up with this man nearly twice her age... Then her glance swung to Tottie and she was amazed at the vicious, vindictive sneer on the girl's lips. But as she pondered this for a moment, a knowing smile fled briefly over her face. So Tottie was jealous of Bill Reed. A woman scorned. Well...almost anything might come of that. Even a chance to clear Tom Jackson's name.

"None of my business, maybe," Tottie said. "But if I was you, I'd bust that up. Been going on too long, already. Ever since your girl came back from school in the East, that buzzard's been kinda makin' sheep's eyes at the kid. 'Taint good. He's thirty if he's a day; she's only a kid of sixteen." Tottie's voice had a rasp from too much hard liquor, but it wasn't altogether the liquor that gave her voice that strange, hard tone today. This time it came more from her heart.

Martha Jackson didn't say anything for a few moments. Then she let her machine slow down, stop, swabbed the perspiration from her brow and turned to the dance hall girl. She couldn't talk over her troubles with the town women. None of her old friends seemed to want to be seen talking to her any more, since Tom was killed and suspected of robbing the bank. But she had to talk to someone, and anyway, Tottie had a kind heart beneath her bluff at being hard and wise.

"Ever since Tom was murdered, I've had a feeling about that man Bill Reed," Martha began. "Oh, maybe I'm a fool to suspect him and Jude. I haven't a single definite thing to go on except that they always have plenty of money, never do any work. Call it a woman's intuition, anything you like...but there it is. And I knew Tom Jackson well enough to know that he never could do a dishonest thing like robbing a bank.

"Well, I couldn't go to Sheriff Andy White with an intuition. He'd laugh. But I can't help having a strong feeling, just as if I'd seen it happen, that Reed was mixed up in that robbery of the bank—he and Jude," she said slowly. She paused, went to the window for a moment, gazed up the street after Jenny and Reed.

"Well, you got something right under your nose that's a lot more important than a flash of intuition, right now...your girl and Reed," Tottie cut in.

"That's right. It worries me a lot to see Jenny cotton to Reed as she does. I've tried my best to break up their attachment. But you know how that works—just makes her the more determined. It's his smooth, slick manners I guess. And he *is* good looking...tall, slender, with that wavy black hair and..."

"So is the devil good looking," Tottie cut in sharply. Martha chuckled shortly, despite her worry.

"How about some of the ranchers' boys?" Tottie asked. "Couldn't you fix it so one of them'd cut Reed's time? You just can't let Reed win that baby."

"Oh, no, that won't work. Jenny just laughs at the shy, awkward manners of the ranch boys."

"Here's something," Tottie said.

"Once I heard Reed and Jude arguing about Jenny. Jude hates to have Reed with her. Said it was dangerous. He's as suspicious as the devil."

MARTHA sighed. "Maybe I can send Jenny back east to school again in a month or two, and get her away from Reed. I'm making fine tailored blue flannel shirts for the cowboys now. Pearl buttons, yellow silk stitching and all that. Got more orders than I can fill."

Tottie's eyes lit up. "That's the thing," she said quickly. "The sooner you get the kid away from Two Arrows, the better. You never can tell what might happen. If you could ...Oh hell! No use trying to hide it any further, I guess. I'm not fooling anyone. Once I thought Bill Reed and I... We were lovers. We were going away—get married. Some place where nobody would know I'd ever been in a dance hall, and I could live decent and have decent women friends. All that. I really did love him. I sure did. Then Jenny came home. And... Oh, what a damn fool a woman can be over a man. What a blasted fool! I still can't forget him, and when I see him with Jenny... Oh well..." She shrugged, turned away.

Martha's eyes went wise. But there was pity, sympathy and understanding in them too. "Poor Tottie," she murmured.

But a definite plan was slowly forming in Martha Jackson's mind. If it worked, if her intuition were correct, Tom Jackson's name would be cleared of the cloud that hung over it. And Jenny's young and dangerous dream of romance with Bill Reed would be blown wide open for her to see and hate. One depended upon the other. If one worked, they both worked. It might leave a scar on poor Tottie's heart. But the girl would be better off in the end. Jenny, too.

So Jude hated to see Reed with Jenny. Well...the thing to do was just play Bill Reed and his partner, one against the other. That was the way to bring this thing to a head. There'd be no danger for Jenny. Martha felt sure of Reed's guilt—Reed and White Eye Jude. Where did all their money come from, if they hadn't stolen it? A definite break between these two, and the whole business might burst into the open. It was worth a try.

THE DRESS finished, the try-on over, Tottie got ready to leave for the Palace, just up the street on the other side. "Come in often, won't you Tottie?" Martha urged, as she went to the door with the dance hall girl. "I'm so lonely here. Reed has just about made Jenny hate me. She's on guard for some remark I might make against him, constantly. And I do love her so, Tottie. Jen's so unthinking about it all. You know how it is."

Tottie's brown eyes softened. She hesitated briefly. "Sure. Sure. Oh I know what a fool I'm being over Reed," she burst out suddenly, close to tears. "He don't want me any more, and you've been so nice to me. Just as if I were a respected town woman, instead of a...well, just a dance hall girl that any drunken cowboy can dance with. Oh, I'd like to help you. I do know things—yes. But if I told you—well, I just can't take the chance, that's all. They'd murder me if they found out." She impulsively threw her arms around Martha, kissed her and ran out the door, tears running down her cheeks.

And as she left, Bill Reed and Jenny, back from their stroll, stopped in front of the little dressmaking shop. In her blind hurry, Tottie nearly collided with them. A few doors away, Jude halted in mid-stride, startled, and stared at Tottie as she ran, stumbling, through the dust toward the Palace. There was a thoughtful look in Jude's one good eye as he watched the girl.

Leaving Jenny at her door, Reed waited for Jude a little way off and the two talked excitedly for a few minutes. Then Martha saw them cross the street and head for the Palace, in the growing darkness. She smiled quietly. "So that killer Jude

is afraid for Reed to be with Jenny," she thought. "Well, when he finds out what I'm going to do about that, I wonder how he'll feel. He already distrusts Reed."

Jenny had hurried inside without a word to her mother and Martha gazed after the girl yearningly for a few minutes. At last, she sighed deeply, went back to her kitchen and began preparing supper.

It was dark when the two sat down. Jenny ate in silence until she could stand it no longer. At last she blurted, "Well, what are you looking at me like that, for, Mother? Just because I was out for a walk with Bill—I mean, Mr. Reed, anybody'd think I had committed a crime. I don't care. I like him and he likes me. We're not like these rough ranchers around here. He's refined and educated. And so am I."

Martha gazed at the girl for a moment, her eyes unreadable. Then a quiet, serene smile spread over her face. "Of course you may go out with Mr. Reed," she said slowly. "Any time. I have no objections. In fact I'd be pleased if you'd bring him to the house. Why don't you? Tonight. I've got a nice cake and I'll make some coffee. It will be cozy."

Jenny gazed at her mother as if she couldn't believe what she had heard. "Why mother! Do you really mean that? Oh yes! I know Bill would be glad to come. But I can't understand. You've always refused to let me bring him here before. You've hated him. And now, all of a sudden... Oh, I know you'll like him when you get to know him. He's really fine, Mother."

"Perhaps I shall, Jenny." Secretly, she dreaded to hurt the girl by showing Bill Reed up in his true colors, maybe as a bank robber, a murderer, if her plans worked out. But if she were wrong, nobody would be hurt. Jenny was young; she'd get over it if Reed were guilty. And this small hurt would be far less than what might happen if the girl actually married Reed on the sly, some time.

JENNY WAS busy before the mirror, getting ready for her date until Reed whistled, from the sidewalk in front of the shop. Then she skipped happily to the front door.

Martha heard them talking, just outside on the porch. "But are you sure your mother wants me to come in?" Reed was saying. "After all, I'd feel sort of queer...hadn't we better just stroll up to the old bridge, like we always do? It's nice of your mother, but, well..."

"But Mother really wants you to come in, Bill. She said so. And I do, too. She's going to fix coffee and have a cake and all."

"That's what I was afraid...well, all right Jen. Anything you want, you know." He wheeled, looked quickly up and down the street.

They turned toward the door, but before they came inside Martha saw Jude watching them with keen interest from a spot across the street, near a post light. She saw the gunman dash his cigarette angrily to the ground, before he wheeled and rode into the Long Horn Saloon. Things were working out; her hopes rose.

As Jenny and Reed came into the living room, back of the dressmaking shop, Martha advanced, extended her hand cordially. "So glad you could come in, Mr. Reed," she greeted him.

Reed bowed low over her hand. "This is an unexpected pleasure, Mrs. Jackson. It is a rare treat to be entertained by two such charming ladies." But, for all his suave speech he was obviously ill at ease, on guard.

Martha smiled. "I'm sure that the pleasure will be all mine," she murmured, thinking of her scheme. "But come; do sit down and let's visit. Smoke if you like, Mr. Reed."

Bill Reed gazed at Martha suspiciously for a moment. But she was smiling disarmingly. He settled into a chair, fished out a cigar, clipped the end off meticulously and lit it.

"I always did like the smell of a good cigar. Mr. Jackson smoked them constantly, before he was so

brutally murdered," Martha said quietly.

Reed started, almost dropped his smoke. Then recovering his ease with an effort he said, "Yes. Yes. Mighty tragic thing. But surely you don't blame me for my testimony that night, Mrs. Jackson. I had to tell the truth as I saw it. The sheriff got pretty rough with me, as you know. I..."

"Oh, let's not talk about it," Jenny cut in. "Mother, why can't you be more..."

"Now, don't blame your mother, Jen," Reed interrupted soberly. "It was naturally a great shock to her. To both of you. And some day maybe the truth about it all will come out. I know Tim Jackson couldn't have been in on that robbery. He wasn't that sort of a man. But all I could tell the sheriff was what I saw. I hope you don't hold it against me, Mrs. Jackson."

"Yes, I know the truth will come out. And soon," Martha said soberly. Then she smiled again. "But let's be happy while we can. I baked a nice big cake today and I'll make some coffee. We'll have a little feast, and visit, all cosy and nice. Just the three of us. I'll go make the coffee right now." She jumped up, went into the kitchen. She could hear the faint murmur of voices behind her, as she stoked up the stove.

MARTHA was cutting the cake when suddenly she was startled by a soft tapping on the window. She could faintly see a woman outside the pane. She hurried to the door. Tottie Edgren stood to one side in the dark, holding a finger to her lips for silence. Martha held back an exclamation of pity with difficulty. Tottie's lips were swollen and cut, her face bruised and discolored.

Martha glanced toward the living room, listened for a moment, then stepped outside. "Tottie, what in the world happened to you?" she whispered. "Oh, you poor girl! Tell me; what happened?"

"He did it. Bill Reed did it. He slapped me so hard he knocked me down. And that brute, Jude; he hit me with his fist. They thought I told you something, this afternoon when I was over here. Anyway, they realize that I know too much about them. I believe they would have killed me if some cowboys hadn't come down the hall past my door. I threatened to scream for help."

"But Tottie, what made them suspect you?"

"Well, I was crying when I ran out of your shop. And they both saw me. That Jude is a suspicious devil. But nobody can do that to me. Now, I'm cured of Reed, for good. I hate him! And I'm going to tell you everything I know. I hope what I'm going to tell you will hang Reed. And Jude too. I heard them quarreling about money once, and I listened. Jude said, 'I'm going to have my full cut. I'm tired fooling. I want my half. I can take care of my own money without any help from you.' Then..."

"Mother. Mother, where are you?" It was Jenny's voice, in the kitchen. Martha whispered, "Wait for me, Tottie. I'll send her back into the living room." She turned to the door. But as she reached it she saw Tottie wheel and run desperately away down the back road in the dark.

A glance toward the street showed her White Eye Jude leaning against the corner of her shop apparently busy rolling a smoke. He hadn't been there when she first came out. No doubt Tottie had seen him too. Martha wasn't surprised to see Jude there. She was smiling as she came into the kitchen. Now, she was sure she was right in her suspicions. Jude was spying on Reed, afraid of what he might let slip.

"Mother, I didn't hear you out here. Isn't the coffee almost ready? I'm hungry."

"Almost ready, Jen. You go on back and entertain Mr. Reed. I'll be in with it, soon."

Three times during the evening, Martha glimpsed the scowling face of Jude, listening at the open side window. As Bill Reed rose to leave later on, she raised her voice a bit so the gunman would be sure to hear and said, "Thanks so much for your

confidence that Mr. Jackson's murderer will be caught soon, Mr. Reed. I'm sure of it too. And do come in again real soon, won't you?"

Reed looked a bit confused at this but he recovered quickly, smiled and said, "Oh yes. He's bound to be caught, Mrs. Jackson. I'll help all I can to have him arrested. Maybe I've got an idea who to have arrested, right now. Yes, I know I have. And thanks for a mighty pleasant evening. I'll be seeing you both soon, I hope."

As he left he fell in with a crowd of cattle men, drifted slowly toward his hotel room with them, talking and joking. Through the curtain, Martha saw Jude ease out of the alley beside her place and follow, at a distance, carefully.

NEXT DAY was Saturday and Two Arrows filled up rapidly with ranchers, in town to celebrate a day off from work. Martha was up early, hurrying around in her soft Indian house moccasins, straightening her shop in anticipation of customers among them for the fine hand tailored shirts that she made.

She was folding some of the shirts, already finished, when loud voices across the street came to her ears. She peered through the curtains. Bill Reed and Jude were arguing violently, in front of the Long Horn saloon. She heard Jude growl, "Nobody double-crosses me and lives. I heard what you said to Mrs. Jackson last night. You ain't turnin' me in. If anybody swings for that, it ain't goin' to be me. And I want the rest of my cut. Today! I'm gettin' out of here. I want what's mine out of that money. Right now!"

"Quiet, you fool," Reed snarled. After that, Martha could hear no more of their talk. But they were still quarreling, getting more excited by the minute.

Suddenly she saw Jude leap back, his two long-fingered gun-fighter's hands shadowing his guns. He growled, in a louder tone, "Draw, blast yuh. Draw! We're havin' a show-down. Right here!"

Reed stared steadily at him for a moment, turned his back and started diagonally across the street. Then abruptly, he wheeled, his hand diving swiftly for his gun. But Jude was not to be caught napping by this trick. He had been watching Reed like a hawk. His six-guns leaped into his hands with incredible speed. His right gun blasted as Reed's hand touched leather.

Reed faltered, staggered; his hand went to his ribs. He collapsed in the dust, rolling his head from side to side in agony. A red stain flooded over his shirt on the left side.

At the shot, cowboys came barging out of the Long Horn saloon in a mob. "Jude murdered 'im," someone in the crowd bawled. "I seen 'im. Reed was walking away. His gun is still in leather. Git 'im, boys. String 'im up."

But Jude was dead calm—as cold as ice. This was no new game to him. He backed into the middle of the street, straight toward Martha's little shop. Men on that side ran hastily right and left, out of the line of fire, scurried into any door that offered shelter.

Fifteen feet in front of Martha's shop, Jude halted. He had dropped his guns into leather, but both hands were poised for the draw. "Yeah. Yeah. I shot 'im," he said quietly. "He was double-crossin' me. Tryin' to do me out of my share of the... tryin' to keep what was mine. He was goin' for his gun when I shot 'im. Any o' you cow nurses want to take up for the skunk, go for yore irons. Go on! Reach for 'em." Nobody in the crowd moved a hand.

Then Tottie Edgren came from the Palace, ran wildly down the board walk, her hair flying around her head. She shrieked, "Kill 'im! Kill 'im! He helped rob the bank and kill Mr. Jackson. I know what I'm talking about. Kill 'im! Either he or Reed shot Tom Jackson." Apparently, Tottie hadn't seen Reed lying in the street yet.

"She lies" Jude yelled. His guns flashed into his hands. A quick shot blasted from the right one, whanged into the wall back of Tottie. She

shrieked, dodged into the crowd. She knew well that Jude hadn't missed her through poor shooting.

JUDE BACKED slowly away, nearer and nearer to Martha's porch. "I won't miss if any o' you rannies reach for a gun," he growled.

Jenny called in a high pitched, frightened voice, "Mother! Mother! What's wrong? What's wrong?"

Martha turned, ran back to the living room. "Get in your room, Jenny. Stay there," she ordered, in a tone that sent the girl scurrying. When Martha ran back to the front of her shop, took her stand just inside the open front door, her right hand was under her apron, her jaw set, her blue eyes flashing.

Jude backed onto the sidewalk. His eyes darted to where saddled horses were tied to a hitch rack, ten feet away. He waved his guns at the crowd across the street. "Go on! Git inside the saloon. All of yuh. Move, now, or I'll start shootin'."

Some few started to melt away. Tottie Edgren shrieked, from the crowd, "Cowards! Don't let 'im get away." A growling undertone of sound rose from the crowd and they moved restlessly. But none reached for a gun.

Jude was only ten feet from her door when Martha glided swiftly across the porch, her house moccasins noiseless on the planks. She stepped softly to the sidewalk, swept Tom Jackson's big forty-five Peacemaker from under her apron, jammed its muzzle against White Eye Jude's spine. "Drop that gun!" she snapped in his ear.

Jude hesitated only an instant. His guns hit the sidewalk.

The crowd, released from the deadly menace of those six-guns, surged across the street. "Lynch 'im! Lynch 'im! Get a rope," somebody yelled, again.

"Back on the porch!" Martha snapped at Jude. "Nobody's going to get lynched if I can stop it." Out of the corner of her eye she saw Sheriff White and his deputies run from the jail, down the street. She and Jude backed swiftly up the short steps. She shrilled at the crowd, "Stand back! This is a case for the sheriff. We've got law in this town." She leaped back a few feet to where she could cover both Jude and the crowd. Her gun was steady on the would-be lynchers.

THEN SHERIFF WHITE, flanked by his two deputies, came running up the sidewalk from the town jail. "All right," he said, "I'll take over from here on, Mrs. Jackson." He turned to the crowd in the street. "Go on," he ordered. "Git on about yore business. I'm runnin' things here. And there'll be no lynching. Move, now." The cowboys melted away slowly, muttering in their disappointment.

When they were all gone and the drifting dust had settled, Martha's startled glance swung to two figures in the street. Tottie Edgren sat flat in the deep dust, holding Bill Reed's head in her arms. Tottie was crying softly in a heartbroken way, rocking slowly back and forth, hugging Reed's head to her breast. Her tears were falling steadily.

Martha hurried into the street, dropped to her knees beside them. "Oh, Tottie!" she wailed. "I'm sorry it had to be this way. I'm terribly sorry, Tottie. I never thought it would turn out like this."

Bill Reed slowly rolled his head, gazed at Martha for a moment. Then a slow smile spread over his face. "Well, I guess this is *adios*, Mrs. Jackson. Looks like I'm on the way out. Tell Jenny goodby for me. I really did love that kid," he whispered. "Things work out in queer ways sometimes, don't they? I had to kill Tom Jackson when he came up on the bank porch, that night. I had to. He recognized me, caught Jude and me robbing the bank. I was scared. I shot 'im, sudden. Jude didn't shoot. I don't want anyone to suffer for me, now. I had to lie to the Sheriff to save my skin. And then..."

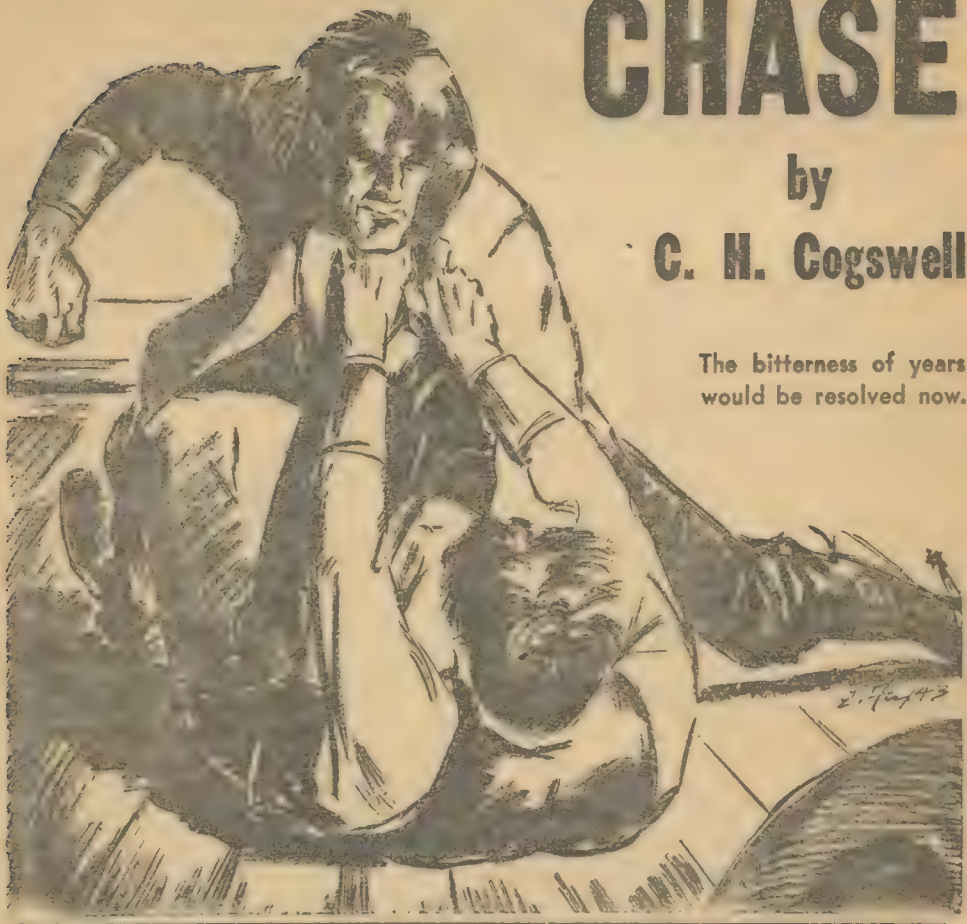
His head sagged. He went limp. Bill Reed was dead. Martha rose slowly and went to find Jenny.

■

WILD GOOSE CHASE

by

C. H. Cogswell



The bitterness of years would be resolved now.

"Lew would come back, now, to claim half the ranch now that Pa's gone," Roy thought. But could he let Lew be taken by the law for a drum-trial hanging?

ROY BARR stepped to the door of his comfortable ranch house with a peculiar uneasiness gripping him, a little frown on his lean face. The door opened in such a way that it could be opened inwardly and with the left hand. In his right hand, his .45 Colt Frontier Six was ready defiance of the darkness and any lurking danger outside. The thick door would deflect a bullet.

"For Gawd's sake," came a deep voice on the threshold, "are yuh goin' t'make me stand here against the light all night?"

"Come in," Roy invited uncertainly, "I—I was just wonderin' who yuh was."

A large black-bearded man stepped into the room, quickly closed the door behind him. He stood there for a minute, his deep blue eyes taking in the room and its contents with

sweeping glances, and his tense face softened a little. Roy stepped back a pace, his gun covering the intruder then as recognition came over him he thrust his gun into it's holster. "Lew!" He managed. "Welcome home!" He thrust out his hand to meet the powerful grip of the other.

"I'm glad to be back," Lew said wearily. "Where's Dad?"

"Dead," Roy said shortly. "Didn't know where yuh was or I'd have notified yuh."

"I—I'm sorry," Lew responded simply, his face going suddenly pale beneath his beard and his strong jaw trembling. "I'm—I'm awfully sorry. Got a drink?"

Roy turned sharply on his boot heel, went to a cabinet near the fire place and set a bottle of whiskey and a tumbler on the table. Carelessly he kicked a chair closer to the table and gestured to his half brother. "Was about to turn in," he yawned. "Was a little bit jumpy I guess—sittin' here readin'. Yuh know how it is."

"Same old Roy," Lew smiled reminiscently. "Always readin' and studyin'. Dad was right; you got all the brains." He smiled and poured himself a half glass full of the whiskey.

"And the same old Lew Harris," Roy looked at the whiskey bottle significantly. "What brought yuh back?"

"Trouble," Lew responded shortly.

"What kind of trouble?"

"Gun trouble. I'll tell yuh about it in the morning; I'm about tuckered."

"Hungry?"

"Almost starved," Lew admitted.

"Go put up your horse," Roy ordered. "You'll find some oats in the box in the corner of the barn. There's a lantern hanging by the door if yuh need a light. You'll find hay. Time yuh get back I'll have yuh some chuck."

LEW HARRIS went out quickly with an easy cat-like tread. He did not stand long in the doorway but closed the heavy door swiftly, almost furtively as though he did not want to appear against the light.

Roy hurried into the kitchen and built a fire in the range, poured some water into the tea-kettle and set it on the fire, removing one of the lids so it would get hot quicker. "Acts like he's got the devil after him," he mused. He peered out of the kitchen window toward the barn. "Puttin' his horse away in the dark," he went on to himself. "Not a sign of a light. Well, I might have known it; trouble is his middle name. Just like him to turn up as soon as Dad is dead to claim half of the ranch. I might have known this is how it would be." He felt the muscles up and down his spine quiver and an old childish fear momentarily went over him. As a boy he had been afraid of Lew.

"I'll not let him shove me out," he resolved. "I've stayed here and earned this ranch. He has no right to it. I'll buy or sell or—I'll fight him for it!"

Lew came in wearily, his face strangely pale as he stood with his back to the closed door. "Yuh look tuckered," Roy observed.

"I'll be all right," Lew's bearded face stiffened and his lips came firmly together with resolve. "Boy that meat smells good!"

Roy watched him eat and it brought back memories. Lew had always been hungry, a big eater. He remembered how Lew had always tormented him when they were boys together, Lew being the older and Roy fearing him. There were the times Lew had taken food off Roy's plate to irritate him; Lew had bullied him around and sometimes Lew got caught by their parents. Roy never had quite figured out why Lew had acted that way; but now a glimmering of the truth came over him. Vaguely he realized that older children often became jealous of the babies who came afterwards, and that jealousy often carries over into later life.

"I know what yuh're thinkin'" Lew observed as he poured himself another cup of coffee. "Yuh're rememberin' how I used to bully yuh around when we was kids. Lookin' back on it makes me ashamed of my-

self but I know why. Dad and mother favored you because yuh had such a sweet disposition. I guess yuh saved me many a lick by keepin' your mouth shut."

"I intended to settle my own grievance with you some day," Roy responded grimly. "I figgered I'd grow big enough so some day I'd whip the daylights out of you. I don't exactly feel like that right now; but yuh remember what Dad said when you left."

"And he was right," Lew agreed, his blue eyes glinting thoughtfully. "He said that the world was big enough for everybody so's we wouldn't have to step on other folks' toes, that wherever I went I'd have to carry my own share of the load and that I wasn't carryin' my weight here. I've often thought of that since. I felt badly treated and abused and sorry for myself and I blamed you for it. I thought you was crowdin' me out."

"Maybe I did, Lew," Roy admitted honestly; "but you had it comin' to you for the way you treated me."

"ANYHOW," Lew went on, "I found out that Dad was right. I got several jobs and when I shirked, I lost out. I know cattle and I'm strong, as you know; I can ride with the best of them, shoot and rope and I'm pretty handy with my fists, too. I've made some long cattle drives; I've gambled and got drunk and raised my share of hell and where did it get me?"

"You've wasted your life and I've hoarded mine," Roy responded grimly.

"And that's not good either, Roy," Lew looked Roy squarely in the eyes. "Life renews itself. You've got to exercise to be strong, you've got to spend your life in order to get it's rewards. I've spent mine unwisely to the point of wasting it; you've not spent yours at all—you haven't even lived. You've set here on this little ranch and nursed a grudge, it's eating inside of you right now. I can see it on your face. You hate me and you wish I'd not come home!"

"Now, Lew," Roy attempted to deny it.

"I've gambled a lot," Lew went on. "I've got into a lot of trouble over cards and women. I've done a lot of things I'm not proud of and I've suffered for doin' it; but accordin' to my own code I've lived life as I saw it. Maybe I'm not bright at books like you are but I've learned a lot about people and when it all boils down, Roy—when yuh boil it all down, no matter how hard yuh work or how smart yuh are with cattle, the thing that will make or break yuh is what yuh know about people!"

"I know enough about people to get along," Roy felt strangely defensive.

"But do you?" Lew leaned forward with conviction. "I doubt it. You've run this two-bit ranch and it's still a two-bit ranch. I've been kicked into places of responsibility. I've been in charge of cattle drives—I've put over some good deals."

"And ended up broke," Roy flung at him.

"Yes," Lew mused gloomily, "I'm broke—worse than broke. I guess I have no right comin' back here and expectin' any help from you and Dad; but I'm entitled to a share of the ranch. After all, I am your half brother."

"You didn't earn it," Roy argued grimly. "You left when yuh was sixteen and as far as I can see you'll never be able to repay Dad for what he did for you. As for me, all I owe you is a punch in the nose."

"So you intend to cut me out," Lew shook his head sadly.

"You never could carry your own weight," Roy persisted. "Havin' you around would only mean a lot of trouble. It's either you or me—buy or sell or—you're supposed to be tough."

A sudden fury swept through him and he was no longer afraid but welcomed the opportunity to even an old score. "Yuh said yourself that you'd done a lot of fighting. Take it to court and I'll beat the pants off you; but I'll be fair with you. I'll fight you for it! If you can whip me I'll get out, take my bed roll, saddle and

a good horse and air out. If I win you go away and don't come back!"

"I don't deserve it all, Roy." Lew looked amused as though watching a child with a tantrum. "You wouldn't have a chance against me. When I was a kid I used to be afraid that someday you'd grow up big enough to whip the daylights out of me. That's why I picked on you so much, so yuh wouldn't get ideas. But we're grown men now; no sense of fighting and squabblin'. I got certain talents and you got yours. Together we could make this one of the finest spreads in the country."

The rashness of youth swept over Roy. "He's afraid of me," he thought: *He was always afraid that some day I'd whip him. Well, I can do it. I will!*

"IT'S NOT the land yuh own or the cattle or the water holes yuh got or how much hay yuh make that counts," Lew went on persistently. "All those are nice and worth a lot; but it's the people that make the wealth or find it—the ideas they have in their heads. I always had big ideas, Roy. You knew that—Dad knew it but he wouldn't listen. Both of you were stubborn; but ideas is what make the desert bloom. Together we could make them work—I need you as much as you need me."

"You slapped me around," Roy clenched his fists and began to stride up and down the kitchen. "You beat me and once you twisted my arm. Remember?"

"That's all water under the bridge, Roy," Lew shrugged. "I had my heart aches and troubles too. I felt alone and badly treated and unloved. Dad and mother always took up for you and what could I do about it? No use pickin' an old sore, Roy. Where would fighting get us?"

"You're yellow," Roy stood over him threateningly. "I always believed that a bully was yellow and I still think so. Will you fight me for the ranch or won't you?"

"I—I'm pretty tired tonight," Lew's deep blue eyes were pleading now. "I—I'd rather not—hell, Roy, I couldn't hit you. I'm not a bully, really; I'm ashamed of the way I used to treat you. Can't you forgive and forget?"

Roy Barr did not like being in the wrong. He felt that Lew was right; but being wrong it infuriated him and he felt that in the battle of wits Lew was getting the best of him. "If yuh won't fight me tonight," he rasped, "I'll make yuh a deal. We'll sleep on it tonight and fight it out the first thing in the morning."

"No," Lew arose and removed his gun belt and hung it over a chair. "We wouldn't get much sleep with this thing unsettled. You would be afraid I'd slip in and knife yuh or shoot yuh while yuh slept. If we gotta fight, might as well get it over."

From somewhere he removed a long hunting knife and laid it on the table, eyeing Roy significantly. "That's the size of my fighting equipment." He moved lithely with the step of a panther or a mountain lion. He opened the kitchen door and peered out, then went to the living room and did the same thing. Roy also removed his gun belt and hung it over a chair. For a full second he glanced at the hunting knife and a little shudder ran up and down his spine. It began to dawn on him that Lew had a lot of ways of fighting and that perhaps he was an adept at all of them.

They pushed the tables and chairs into corners out of the way and stood watching each other in the dim lamp light. Lew's hands hung limply at his sides. "Well," he said grimly, "it's your idea; what yuh waitin' on?"

Roy stood with his guard up, ready to strike, yet reluctant to strike the first blow. He moved around making feinting motions with his fists. Then Lew slapped him.

"Come on, Roy," Lew invited grimly as he deftly avoided Roy's retaliatory rush. "Get the mad out of your system!" His hand flashed out again and he slapped Roy on the other cheek.

ALL HIS accumulated hatred of his half-brother surged up

within him, enraging him. Viciously he struck out again and again only to find empty air. Lew was playing with him as a cat plays with a mouse. Once in a while he would come in and slap Roy's face. "I could cut yuh to ribbons," Lew advised. "All I wanted was t' show yuh that yuh ain't got a chance."

The futility of his efforts drove Roy into a blind rage. Finding that he was unable to get any place with his fists, he decided to grapple his opponent. He rushed blindly trying to tear him limb from limb. He ripped at Lew with claw-like powerful fingers. His rush carried him against the log wall with a crash and for a moment he stood there dazed. Lew stood before him singularly pale beneath his dark beard. His shirt had been ripped half off and then Roy saw something which made him at once weak and ashamed. Across Lew's chest was a bandage, a crimson tinged bandaged which now began to ooze blood. He had been fighting with a wounded man!

A pained expression came over Lew's face. He put his hand to his eyes, staggered and fell heavily backward as his knees buckled under him. He lay there in the middle of the living room floor like one dead, and for a minute Roy stood over him, a new fear clutching at his heart. "I've killed him," he croaked, "I've killed him!"

He knelt beside Lew, felt for his pulse. In his excitement he could feel nothing. He looked down at the crimson stained bandage in fascination and new hope came over him. Lew still lived. The bandage was getting redder and redder.

Lew opened his eyes and a wan smile flitted across his face. "I—I guess yuh won after all, Roy. I—I guess I must have fainted. You fought me for the ranch. Fought me fair and square for it—I—I guess you deserve it."

Roy carried Lew into the bedroom and laid him on a bed. Carefully he removed the old bandage and washed the wound while Lew babbled in unconsciousness. Somehow, the pain of the wound was associated in his mind with the way he had received it and Roy gathered that there had been a gun fight in which Lew had been a reluctant participant. The blood staunched and the wound freshly bandaged, Lew went off into a peaceful sleep, the sleep of exhaustion. It was almost morning when he awoke. "I—I gotta get out of here." He sat up in bed, looking about him frantically.

"Why?" Roy asked gently, pushing Lew back on the bed.

"The Sheriff's after me," Lew explained. "I was about at the end of my rope or I wouldn't have come here. I thought you and Dad would help me or hide me out for a while until I could ride again. Seein' how yuh feel about me, I guess I put my confidence in the wrong place."

Roy ignored the insinuation. "Yuh need a shave," he said gruffly. "I'll shave yuh."

CLEANLY shaven, Lew Harris looked at himself in the small hand mirror then studied Roy. "We look alike," he observed. "Of course I look a little bit older, tougher—and I got that 'don't give a damn' expression; but at a distance you could pass for me or I for you."

"Yeah," Roy agreed, "that's so. What's the Sheriff after yuh for? Kill someone?"

Lew nodded agreement and grunted. "A no-account hot-headed scamp—somethin' about what I used to be. He happened to be the son of a wealthy rancher named Clyde Dailey. I guess yuh heard of the Cross D? We got in an argument over cards and he drew first and put this bullet in me—had a trick gun in one of them spring holsters under his arm pit. I didn't want t'draw another man's blood, Roy but what was I to do?"

For a moment exultation swept over Roy. This situation was made to order. It was as easy as snapping his fingers. All he would have to do was notify the Sheriff where Lew was and he would be rid of him forever. "It—was self-defense though wasn't it, Lew?"

"Sure," Lew responded with conviction. "He put a bullet into me; but how am I to prove it? Yuh see it was this way. The only witnesses was the Baylor Gang and it happened at the outlaw roost called Sidewinder. Of course when the Cross D outfit come poundin' into the place the Baylors lit out. There was gun play and a couple of Cross D riders was wounded. I jumped out the window of the saloon and stood shivverin' and bleedin' outside while the Cross D riders swarmed into the saloon. Before he died young Dailey named me as the killer. I heard old man Dailey shoutin' that he'd pay the man a thousand dollars for shootin' me down." Lew grimaced. "Well, yuh see what a hell of a mess I'm in?"

"Yeah," Roy admitted. "if yuh give yourself up, yuh'll hang for sure unless—unless yuh can prove what happened."

"I finally got a Doc to patch me up," Lew went on. "I told him exactly what had happened and how. I named names of the Baylors who saw it. The Doc said he'd be a witness if I needed him. The trouble is, with a price on my head and maybe four or five different Sheriffs lookin' for me; I'll be dead without a trial. Yuh know how they look at things—a trial is just a lot of bother and a bullet is the quickest way to get the thousand dollar reward. Old Man Dailey would rather have it that way too!"

Roy was struggling with himself. If Lew could manage to clear himself, he would still be in a position to step in and claim half of the ranch. If he turned Lew in to the Sheriff and Lew was hung, the memory would haunt him the rest of his days.

"I don't have to help him, though," he argued with himself. "I don't owe him anything." But he had a feeling of guilt at what he was thinking. He was measuring himself and somehow found himself wanting. "The truth always comes out," he said aloud finally.

"Yeah," Lew admitted, "it always comes out; but sometimes too late."

"What do you plan to do?"

"Why, turn myself in," Lew said without hesitation. "But before I do I hope to be able to get the Baylor gang to give me their version of what happened at Sidewinder."

"An outlaw's word won't hold up in court," Roy argued. "You know that, Lew. It puts yuh on the wrong side of the law; besides how are yuh goin' t' get them t'testify?"

"In writing," Lew explained. "I know where they'll likely be holed up. They trust me. It's my only chance. I think with the Doc's evidence and a written statement from the Baylors I can get off."

"But the Baylors won't be very happy to have you comin' to their hideout with the Sheriff on your tail." Roy reasoned. "Instead of a paper clearin' yuh, they'd probably give yuh a bullet. Best thing is for you to give yourself up and let me go to the Baylors after the evidence."

A HOPEFUL expression came over Lew's face. He was evidently deeply touched. "I'm glad to hear yuh say that, Roy; but it wouldn't work. Sheriff Aiken is a dog on the trail. I've got to throw him off so far he won't be able to pick it up, and one thing sure, I've got to know where he is. He'll be here this morning. He was in Alkali last night and there was some sort of disturbance goin' on; I didn't know what. I talked to a fellow though and from what I gathered everyone was talkin' about the Baylor gang or something. I didn't stick around long enough to find out."

"How do you expect to throw the sheriff off the trail?"

"With your help," Lew responded hopefully. "I don't want you to get mixed up in this, though. All I want you to do is put a relay horse out on the point for me. I'll play hide and seek with Sheriff Aiken and his posse until I wear out their horses, then with a fresh horse under me I'll hit the desert for a while so they'll lose my trail, then double back into the bad lands." He pulled on his boots and arose then abruptly sat down again reeling with weakness.

"It won't work," Roy decided. "Yuh couldn't ride for three hours in the desert without keelin' over. You take the horses and leave a relay on the point for me. I'll throw the Sheriff off your trail. You head for Lone Pine Cabin and rest up for a couple of days. I'll meet yuh there if the coast is clear."

Lew seemed to pull himself together with an effort of will. "I can't let yuh do it, Roy. I got one man's blood on my hands; I don't want yours too. They won't be playin'—they will shoot to kill!"

"You'll do as I say," Roy whirled viciously on Lew, a gun in his hand. "Now make it light on yourself. Either yuh get those horses and get the hell outa here or I'll turn yuh in to the Sheriff."

Lew looked at the tense resolve in Roy's deep blue eyes, the determined thrust of the strong jaw, the black bore of the pistol in Roy's hand. "You win, Roy," he made a futile gesture with his hands. "I'll see yuh at Lone Pine Cabin—if—if—" His voice broke huskily and he almost ran from the room.

ROY WAS riding for his life. He had shot back at the Sheriff and his posse and occasionally he could hear the report of a six-shooter. He smiled grimly as he felt his horse falter beneath him. Lew's big black was a good horse and now the posse was dropping farther and farther behind. A feeling of triumph came over him now for he was approaching the Point, a finger of rocks thrust outward into the desert. So far he had managed to keep out of gun range; the big black was spending himself to the last beat of his noble heart.

If Roy had felt any doubts about Lew's sincerity, they were dispelled when he found the relay horse saddled and ready. In blood, across the saddle, was written: "Good Luck!" That worried Roy, for it indicated that Lew's wound was bleeding again.

With a fresh horse under him Roy felt a contempt for the Sheriff and the prospect of capture. He deliberately waited until the posse was dangerously close before showing himself then he put spurs to his horse and dashed up the trail toward the top of the ledge. Toward the top he felt the horse falter and looking down, saw that the horse had been injured by a sharp piece of projecting rock. On top of the ledge he dismounted and examined the leg of the injured animal. His heart sank and a lump rose in his throat as he noted the suffering of the beast. Regretfully he mounted and began pushing toward the desert. He knew that he couldn't go far, that perhaps he would be shot down; but regardless of what happened to him, he would have to try to keep the posse off Lew's trail.

When his horse fell, Roy scrambled to his feet and raised his hands. The posse was closing in on him from three sides. They came up to him with guns in their hands but the most ominous was Sheriff Aiken. "Well I'll be derned," he fumed angrily. "It ain't Lew, it's Roy! I ought t'run yuh in for aidin' and abettin' a criminal to escape!"

"My horse," Roy responded irrelevantly, "he ran into a sharp rock. He's bleedin' pretty bad."

"Where's Lew?" Sheriff Aiken demanded, his mustache bristling, his face red beyond the redness of sun and wind.

"How would I know?" Roy asked in pretended bewilderment. "He's been gone a long time. What is this anyhow?"

"Well hell!" Aiken spit the words out. "Yuh lead me a wild goose chase in the desert helpin' him t'get away: yuh blowed our hosses and ruined my temper. I'm through. I was only tryin' t'help him. We captured the Baylor gang yestedy and Sam Baylor told about the Dailey shootin'. Just dropped by t'tell yuh." His voice was sarcastic.

A peculiar lightness came over Roy as if a heavy burden had been lifted from him. "Thanks Sheriff, thanks a lot. If—if yuh want Lew or me for anything—well, yuh can find us at the ranch from now on: next time there won't be any wild goose chase!"

★ Dark Before Dawn ★

by Cliff Walters

A trap doesn't care who falls into it!

ANXIETY WAS the whip that drove Jan Garland, lissom and light-haired, along the trail leading down Arrow Creek. Anxiety for the stricken man who lay back there in the new, unfinished cabin at Moccasin Springs; and who, fighting for his life, might soon become enveloped in shadows darker than this dusk now settling over the foothills of the Horizon Mountains.

Pounding along in worn, thin-soled boots, Jan had put two miles behind her. Now, breath coming hard, she half-walked, half-ran toward the ranch buildings belonging to the Garlands' nearest neighbor, nester-hating "Fever" Fraine.

A stocky, prosperous, hard-eyed man with the extremely florid complexion responsible for his nickname, Fraine came out of the house where he and his hired man had just finished eating supper. Coldly he sized in the approaching visitor and said on a flat voice, "What's the big rush, Miss Nester?"

"I hate to ask a favor—knowing how you feel toward Dad and me," puffed Jan, brushing her sleeve across a moist forehead. "I've got to borrow a saddle horse. Got to go to Herdville—get a doctor!"

"Yeah?" Fraine said deliberately. "Maybe this high range ain't as healthy for your father as them Eastern doctors thought it'd be. Maybe you and him should've stayed there instead of traipsin' out to this country in your wore-out wagon and stakin' off a choice piece of cow range right under my—"

"I need a horse—now, Mr. Fraine!" Jan pleaded, desperation in her blue eyes. "Every minute counts. Will you lend me one—perhaps to save a man's life—or must I walk those six miles into town? And probably get there too late?"

"I've got a horse I'll sell you if—"

"Aw, lend that flat-broke nester girl a horse, Fever!" called old Sid Hinshaw, the bald, homely little hired hand who had started to wash the supper dishes. "Can't you see that—"

"You tend to your chores!" Fraine bellowed through the kitchen window. "I can handle my own affairs without the help of some booze-guzzler that nobody else'd hire—and at even the wages I pay you!" Fraine turned back toward Jan and said grudgingly, "Come on, nester; since you're up against it, I'll loan you a horse."

Grateful, Jan followed the gruff, cold-eyed cowman toward the corrals down on the bank of Arrow Creek. Hopefully the girl said, "That rangy sorrel horse you ride is a fine traveller, Mr. Fraine. If you wouldn't mind staking me to him—"

"Beggers ain't choosers!" Fraine snapped; "I've been ridin' the tail off that sorrel today. You can ride a black horse of mine, and use the saddle that belonged to my son—if you'll take care of it."

The black horse was a little touchy, Jan noticed. The stout, fat, Roman-nosed animal flinched just a little when Fraine put the saddle on and cinched it up.

A moment later, however, Jan was in that saddle and riding away. From the porch of the ranch house Sid Hinshaw yelled, "Hey, Fever! Don't you think that black horse might be too—"

"You got them dishes washed?" Jan heard Fraine's impatient voice interrupt. The cowman said something more, but Jan didn't catch the words. She was letting the black horse out into a fast trot, then letting him gallop down the winding road

which led to the little range town of Herdville.

"Come on, black horse—whatever your name is," the rider said, and glanced gratefully at a big moon wheeling up over a cedar-plumed ridge to the east. Anxiety was whipping at Jan again, spurring her on her mission.

Thankful as the homesteader's daughter was to have a mount, she regretted that she had been forced to borrow that mount from Fever Fraine, the cowman who, during the month Jan and her father had been on this range, had made it unmistakably clear that he liked nesters about as much as he liked rattlesnakes. Not that Jan and her father—a gentle man afflicted with lung trouble—had encroached on Fraine. As a matter of fact, the Garlands—without knowing it at the time—had done Fraine a great favor. Andy Garland, filing on Moccasin Springs to establish a home for Jan and himself, had kept that water hole from falling into the hands of a greedy sheepman who wanted to gain a foothold on this range where Fraine's many and fat cattle grazed.

THE BLACK horse, flattening his ears back at times, galloped on. Those galloping hoofs raised a scarf of dust on a road silvered with moonlight. Jan, bright hair blowing under the brim of her limp-brimmed old hat, looked down at the old saddle—and wondered what had ever become of Fever Fraine's only son, Larry. There had been a violent quarrel a year ago between the cowman and his son, Jan had heard. About eighty dollars that the son had spent for a new saddle.

"Young Larry was too decent, too much like his fine mother, to put up with Fever," old Sid Hinshaw had told Jan only last week, when Sin, having sneaked off to town, had a pint bottle in his saddle pocket. "It was an awful jolt to Fever when Larry pulled out and left him. One he'll never get over, I reckon; it's soured him against everything and everybody. But it serves the rock-headed old coot right; he didn't find out till too late that blood's thicker'n water. Huh! I wouldn't be sharin' the old wolf's den, either—not if anybody else'd hire me."

Dust kept spiralling up from the black horse's hoofs. Then, as Jan galloped down a long, rock-strewn stope midway between the Fraine ranch and town, a jackrabbit shot out from under a sagebrush alongside the road. The black horse snorted and leaped off the road. Jan, unbalanced by that unexpected maneuver, grabbed the saddle horn and tried to right herself. But now the black had thrust his Roman nose down between his front legs. He soared into the air and came down hard. He shot upward. The girl landed on her right in the opposite direction.

Surprised, shaken—but desperate—Jan clung with all her might to stay aboard. But she couldn't. On the fourth jump the vicious-bucking black spilled her—and kicked her on the right leg as she plunged earthward. The girl landed on her right shoulder. The moon swirled crazily against the eastern sky. Then, through the daze enveloping her, Jan could hear the echo of hoofbeats as a run-away horse headed toward Arrow Creek.

Numb, groggy, Jan struggled to her feet. Her shoulder pained when she moved her arm. Her right leg, bruised by the impact of a horse's kick, made her wince as she limped on toward the distant lights of Herdville. But she limped onward, painful step after step, down the rock-strewn slope.

"Doctor!" she moaned grimly. "I've got to..."

TWO HOURS later Jan was a bruised, weary but erect passenger in the buckboard that went whisking past the Fraine place—Doc McKnight's buckboard wheeling fast behind a rangy team of gray horses well-known for their fast trot and stamina.

From the shadowed porch of a log house a stocky figure stepped out into the moonlight. The harsh voice of Fever Fraine bellowed, "Hey, you, Miss Nester! Where's my black horse?"

"Dead, I hope!" shouted old Doc

McKnight, a stern-jawed man with gray hair and bright, dark eyes. "Wait till I tell the sheriff about you foisting that man-killing, spoiled cayuse off onto a girl that's worth a dozen of you and your outlaw crowbaits!"

The gray team sped on a fast clip. Jan, her wrenched shoulder aching, glanced back and saw Fever Fraine standing there statue-still in the moonlight.

"Don't fret about that no-good black horse, Jan," said Doc McKnight. "If he never gets home, it'll be no loss to Fraine. That treacherous cayuse, spoiled in the breaking, smashed up one man that I attended to. And he might have killed you tonight. Which—Fraine being what he is—probably hoped he would do!"

Another swift two miles and the buckboard halted before a new, unfinished cabin at Moccasin Springs. A tall, elderly man appeared in the lamp-lit doorway and Jan, dreading to ask the question, called, "How is he, Dad?"

"Still hangin' on, and that's about all," replied Andy Garland in a low, troubled voice. "Gosh, but I'm glad Herdville got a doctor six months ago. And glad that doctor's here. I sure hope— Jan! What's happened to *you?* You're limpin and holdin' yourself as stiff as—"

"Don't worry about me, Dad," interrupted the daughter. "Go and help Doctor McKnight tend to that young stranger. Have you found out who he is yet? Where he's from?"

"Nope," her father answered. "He just mumbles and groans—and suffers all the tortures of Hell."

Doc McKnight hurried indoors and started to diagnose the ailment of the husky, dark, handsome young man who lay on the new bunk in the larger room of the cabin. The examination completed, Doc McKnight said cryptically, "He's been poisoned!"

"Poisoned?" Jan whispered.

Minutes dragged by. Jan stood in the cabin doorway and watched Doc McKnight administer to a suffering patient who, at sundown this evening, had come wobbling down the slope above Moccasin Springs—to collapse in front of Jan who, at first, had believed him to be drunk. But Jan's loathing had quickly turned to pity when she and her father had reached the fallen man's side...

Jan's badly-wrenched shoulder hurt her as she waited—and silently prayed. She leaned against the door jamb to take weight off the leg a black horse had kicked. Doc McKnight worked away—and told Andy Garland about the horse that Fraine had loaned Jan. The girl saw her father's fist clench.

ONE OF THE doctor's gray horses nickered. Jan turned and saw two riders coming up the road. They were easy to recognize. One of them was Fever Fraine; the other was Fraine's hired man, Sid Hinshaw, small and hunched over in his saddle.

As coldly as Fraine had greeted her earlier this evening, Jan said, "What do you want, Mr. Fraine?"

"Fifty dollars for that saddle you lost for me tonight," the cowman answered flatly. "Oh, my black horse finally came home, but the saddle was missin'; I can prove that by Sid here."

"Yeah?" said Andy Garland, standing in the doorway beside his daughter. "Maybe you'd like to collect for that old saddle—which you've got cached somewhere—out of my hide!"

"Hold your lip and save your strength, invalid," Fraine growled, stiffening in his saddle. "So the old nester's goin' to turn tough, eh? I hope that new doc from Herdville ain't been puttin' ideas into your head, Mr. Garland. And the doc's goin' to tell the *law* about me stakin' a poor little nester girl to a bad horse, is he? Well, I'm goin' to tell the law something, too! About a couple of nesters goin' into my range cabin up at The Forks—" the speaker waved toward the nearby mountains slope— "and stealin' my grub!"

"We didn't 'steal' your grub," Andy Garland replied. "My daughter and me got caught in an awful rain storm while we were up there gettin' out some house logs. We took shelter in your cabin, and ate a meal while we were there. And here, you cheapskate hater of homesteaders, is

the pay for what we ate!"

Angrily, contemptuously, Garland flung a couple of silver dollars on the ground in front of Fraine's sorrel horse—the same horse the cowman had refused to lend Jan tonight.

"Now, get out, Fraine!" Andy Garland said. "And don't ever set foot on this place again—not after that mean, dangerous trick you played on Jan. She deserved something better than that, when she was doin' her level best to get help for a stranger that was on the verge of death!"

"Stranger?" echoed Sid Hinshaw. "Fever and me thought *you* was havin' another spell, and needed the doc. Your daughter didn't say that—" Hinshaw slid from his saddle, glanced wistfully at the two silver dollars lying in front of Fraine's horse, then moved curiously toward the cabin door.

"Go on in, Mr. Hinshaw," Jan said. "After all, *you* were decent enough to start objecting to your boss about the horse he'd loaned me tonight—when I rode away from the Fraine place. Go on in. Perhaps you'll recognize this young stranger."

"Yes. Come on, Hinshaw!" Doc McKnight called.

Hinshaw looked at the patient. Suddenly the little man whirled. His pale eyes were bulging, his voice unsteady, as he called, "Hey, Fraine! It—it's Larry!"

For a moment Fraine blinked. Then he was off his horse and striding into the cabin; was standing there gazing upon the son he hadn't seen for a year, the son he had feared he might never see again. Fraine's gaze lifted. He looked at Doc McKnight and blurted, "What—what's happened!"

"Poison," the doctor replied coldly. "I think it might have been strychnine."

"Will he—live?" Fraine talked with great effort.

"I think so," Doc answered. "I could have gotten here a great deal sooner, of course, if you'd had the decency to lend Jan Garland a gentle horse—instead of indulging your hatred for nesters."

"Strychnine!" Sid Hinshaw echoed loudly. "Which direction was young Larry comin' from when he wandered in here, Jan?"

"From the mountains," answered the girl gravely.

Hinshaw was hurling his words at Fraine. "You locoed, grudge-nursin' fool! Baitin' flour for a couple of nesters—makin' a trap of your range cabin up at The Forks—and ketchin' your own hungry son in that trap!"

"What's this?" Doc McKnight demanded quickly. "Baiting flour? With what, Fraine. Strychnine?"

"I—I mixed up some poison flour to kill chipmunks with," the red-faced man faltered. "The chipmunks was gettin' into the sacks of oats I left up there for horse feed. I thought —thought—"

"You thought Dad would get it, didn't you?" Jan flared, her blue eyes flashing. "Because Dad and I got caught in a storm, because we mixed up a batch of flapjacks in your cabin, and with your precious grub..."

Shuddering, Jan turned toward her father. She saw that wrath was a surging tide hammering at his self-control. Suddenly that tide rolled over the bulwarks of Andy Garland's restraint. He leaped at Fever Fraine and lashed out with his fist.

That blow was too quick for Fraine to dodge. Those hard knuckles smashed against his tight-clamped mouth and sent him reeling back against the cabin wall. And down with a thud that jarred this log dwelling. He blinked, bounded to his feet and leaped at Andy Garland.

"This one's for Jan!" Garland said. And again his fist lashed out, harder this time. Again Fraine rocked backward and went down. This time he stayed there for a while.

THE LONG HOURS of night dragged on. Jan went into her little room, but she didn't go to bed. She sat by the window and prayed for a dark young man who had battled so valiantly against Death. From her window the girl could see Fever Fraine, hands clenched behind him, pacing back and forth in front of the

cabin. Sometimes he paused by the door and looked at his striken son. And Jan knew that a father was suffering tortures greater than flailing fists could ever inflict.

Jan heard Doc McKnight say to the men in the other room with him —Sid Hinshaw and her father: "Fraine's the picture of a man going through Hell tonight. A man that's a father before he's the grudge-warped person we know as Fever Fraine."

"He wasn't like that before Larry quit him," Jan heard Sid reply; "that loss kinda poisoned his mind."

The patient responded to the doctor's tireless efforts. Dawn found young Larry Fraine, weak but out of danger, sitting up on the edge of the bunk, talking to his father. Larry related how violently sick he had become after making a batch of flapjacks at his father's range cabin. The young man had been returned home afoot, he said, because he had sold his horse in order that he might restore to his father the eighty dollars about which they had quarreled.

"Eighty dollars!" Fever Fraine mumbled. "I'd gladly give eight thousand to have you back—and to stay!"

Jan motioned to her father, to Doc McKnight and Sid Hinshaw. The four of them quietly left the cabin and walked down to the spring where Jan said, "I'm not so angry at Fever Fraine as I was last night. Don't the rest of you think it would be better if Larry didn't know that he got poison intended for a nester?"

"You're right, Jan," said her father.

"Yes, she is," Doc McKnight agreed slowly. "Fraine suffered enough last night to last him a lifetime. And this morning he's a different man—humble, willing to do anything in the world to make things right with everybody.

After a while Fraine came down to the spring. To Jan he said quietly, "My son wants to see you—Jan."

"Why, of—of course," said the girl, and walked back to the cabin.

Larry Fraine smiled at her with dark eyes as he said, "So you're Jan Garland, the good Samaritan! Dad's told me all about you—how you limped to Herville last night, and got the doc that saved my life. What happened? Did the horse Dad let you have—fall with you?"

"Yuh—yes," Jan said, coloring because it was hard to lie, and perhaps because the unwavering gaze of dark eyes disturbed her.

"Fibber!" Larry Fraine said. "Dad told me the *whole*, miserable story —even about the bait he'd planted in his range cabin. Now, after all that, you're willing to save Fever Fraine's bacon by—"

"Haven't *you* suffered enough?" interrupted the girl. "If you're feeling able, I'm sure Doctor McKnight will take you in his buckboard as far as your home."

"Nope," said the young man. "I'll be glad to stay here a day or two, or more, as a wonderful doc advised me to. Huh! A brand new cabin with flower-patterned curtains on the windows. And a girl with blue eyes and soft pretty hair... Funny. This is what I've been dreamin' about for a long time. And didn't know it until just now when I saw you standin' here, Jan Garland."

"Please!" she said, a little flustered and wondering why a world that had been filled with hate and ugliness had suddenly taken on a brightness that rivaled the flaming banners of dawn.

"Let me stay," Larry said, his eyes paying the tribute of worship to this girl who had helped to save him. "Oh, I'm *glad* that the Garlands homesteaded here. Now we can be neighbors, you and me, Jan. Not just neighbors *always*, you understand, but—"

"No, I—I don't understand," she said—with her lips. But her heart wasn't saying that. Perhaps she could understand, just a little, what time was to prove later—that last night had been a dark, dark hour before the dawn; and that some day soon she and a handsome young man who had taken the home trail would be more than just neighbors.

●

"You brought back One-Eyed Garcia, Bat, when others failed!"

They'd been pards for long, Captain Jim Amster and Bat Odet. But Bat had been doing the work, while Jim grabbed the glory. And the word spread around that the Ranger captain was yellow...

THE YELLOW TORNADO

by Cliff Campbell

Complete Novelet

FEAR WAS stamped indelibly on the faces of the tense gathering as the train wheezed to a halt at the mean little depot in Presidio town. Haggard, hollow eyes shuttled from coach to coach, anxious to see Captain Jim Amster's

Texas Rangers boiling forth for business. Chubby, florid-faced Major Lafe Lassiter stood aloof from the welcoming committee, clasping and unclasping his hands nervously. The strain of circumstances surrounding his call for help from the rangers was plain in his furtive eyes. Fervently he hoped Captain Amster had come himself. The gang of killers holding the town and making sport of its law were a tough bunch. It would take the best the rangers had to offer to subdue them. And Captain Amster had the reputation of being the best damn ranger ever to rod this hell's pincushion known as the Texas Big Bend.

But no bleak-eyed men with the look of the hunter in their faces alighted from the coaches. Hopes sank to bootheels as only one passenger stepped down and the train snorted on. He was a short, stocky man, weathered and saddle-warped. His broadcloth coat was faded to the color of his levis. He carried a carpet bag after the fashion of the drummers who frequented the border. His half boots were scuffed and scarred. Business had been using him badly, it appeared. His cherubic face was bland, yet molded with definite characteristics that make for determination and ruggedness. He came toward the gathering, a tight grin on his lips. The train puffed from the station, the gathering watching it disappointedly.

Angrily Mayor Lassiter spun to face the townspeople. He thundered: "Looks like Cap Amster let us down! There shoulda been some men on that train. We'll have tuh take the law into our hands with Marshal Readon boothill bound. All uh you who'll side me...go home an' get yore guns! We'll torch the Orejana Saloon an' smoke them killers out! Dang the rangers! We cain't wait no longer!"

Before anyone in the crowd could answer, the newcomer's voice was roaring, the resonance and authority in it surprising. The banked sea of determined faces swayed to him like a wave.

"Mob rule ain't much better than a renegade's," the pilgrim boomed "Don't do anything yuh'll regret the rest uh yore days!"

The mayor's tanned face flushed to a deeper hue. "I'll thank you tuh keep out uh my business!" he stormed. "We don't need advice from a down-east ribbon peddler!"

The stranger's grin tightened. "You'll take it an' like it!" he clipped grimly. "An' I ain't peddlin' ribbon, fella; I'm Ranger Bat Odett, actin' orders from Captain Jim Amster tuh Mayor Lassiter. What's all the hullabaloo here for? Expectin' a circus?"

Gone now was the stranger's smile. Bat's cobalt blue eyes were like chilled steel. His short, stocky frame seemed to grow. He looked potent as a stick of dynamite now—with a short fuse. Mayor Lassiter gulped.

"Why...why...er," he stammered, thrusting his hand inside his box coat in Napoleonic gesture. "You see we...ah...have plenty misery here. I wired Amster for men. We've two killers, Bucktooth Jack an' Pard Pawley, holed up in the Orejana Saloon. They killed our marshal an' deputy, gut-shot the new man appointed, an' dared the town tuh do something about it. Naturally, I supposed Jim Amster would send some uh his boys, considering the caliber uh them man-killin' polecats."

Bat shook his head curtly in negation. "Not for a little thing like this," he scoffed. "Hell! Our ratio is tacked on the wall at Tres Nogales: Two killers... One ranger. Four killers ...a ranger an' a new recruit. A night raiding band from across the border...two recruits. That's gospel with Captain Amster. Where at did you say this Orejana Saloon is?"

The people packed closer. "You don't mean tuh say," he gasped, "yo're goin' up there?"

Bat's eyes blinked. "I doubt they'd come if I sent for 'em."

"You can't do that!" cried the mayor, emotionally. "They're curly wolves! They'd fang the hide from you with lead."

"I got poison for wolves," intoned Bat flatly, tapping his shoulder hideouts. "Mayor Lassiter, this's my job; Texas pays me for bein' a ranger, a desert policeman."

"Let me deputize a couple of the boys to help?"

Odett shook his head. "They might get hurt." He turned to the gaping station agent, said: "When's the next train back to Tres Nogales?"

With palsied fingers, the oldster fished out a huge watch. It chimed musically in his hand. "Two o'clock!" he cackled. "Next train comes through at four."

Grimly, the ranger nodded. "See to my bag," he ordered. "An' mind you set the signal to stop that buckin' iron hawss; I can make it home fer supper."

Then he was swinging from the platform, the press of people parting to let him through. Mouths hung agape, eyes were startled and wide. They spread out behind him, fanning to right and left, seeking vantage points from which to view the drama. Mayor Lassiter commanded some of the village stalwarts to stay close that they might recover his body when it was tossed from the saloon—like the others had been.

AS BAT slogged up the center of the dusty street, he fished in his pocket and brought forth his badge. He watched his hands as he pinned it to the lapel of his faded coat. They were steady, and the snap caught the first time he tried.

This was an old story to him—had been for ten years now under Captain Jim Amster. Gruff, grizzled, strait-laced Jim always sent him on these chores. Jim had kept Bat with him wherever he went. Together, they had rodded the Big Bend for four years now. And Jim's fame had grown. Bat simply used the job to supply food for Sarah Odett, his wife, and little Bob, just two. He was tight-lipped, hated the limelight. Jim gloried in it, grew smug with unearned praise.

The thought of Sarah jerked Bat up. What if he should get killed by one of those border hellions some day? What would she do...and little Bob? Bat hadn't thought much about that...just worked blindly for Jim Amster. The only riffs he and Sarah had ever had were over Jim, Sarah angered almost to the point of cursing when the captain's name was mentioned. She wanted Bat to advance from the ranks instead of blindly heaping more laurels upon his superior.

She often said scornfully: "...and he sits back in his office, getting a reputation and fat...while you work. Bat Odett, if you had any gumption you'd have been a captain long ago. Jim gets all the glory in this team ...all you get is...gunsmoke. Like the time you got One-Eyed Garcia, after two Rangers had failed. Oh, that four-flusher...!"

And Bat pacified her with: "I've got a man's work to do, honey. Glory don't mean a thing; it's the conscience that matters. Names don't make men...."

Presidio's false-fronted buildings were dropping behind him. Bat indulged in a slight grin. He always thought of Sarah and what she thought of Jim, just before a gunsmoke play like this.

Now he drove everything but determination from his mind. Ahead, on the left side of the street, stood the Orejana, weathered and blistered by suns and rains, the front and canvas roof covering the killers. No sounds came from the place. The piano was still, the swing doors seemingly vibrating with the tension. Bat knew it was the light breeze blowing off the Rio Grande.

Eyes narrowed, hands idly grasping the lapels of his faded coat, he strode boldly up and barged through the doors. As they flapped shut behind him he blinked, his eyes like two magnetic gimlets on the killers who leaned indolently against the bar. For an instant he stood just inside, feet wide-braced, to accustom himself to the shadows after exposure to the bright sunlight. His bleak gaze swept the renegades.

Bucktooth was closest. His two huge front teeth pushed out his thin lips in a perpetual snarl. He was tall, thin to the point of cadaverousness. His beady eyes were close-set, almost bumping together beneath his sloping brow. Ham-like fists dangled close to his gun-butts. Bat catalogued him as the one to watch—first.

Pard Powley was fat, his pudgy face covered with unhealthy sweat. His paunch spilled over the wide belt he wore, and it had been a long time since he had seen his holsters. But there was no doubt in Bat's mind; the fat killer's hands could locate his gun heels speedily.

Now the ranger's voice cracked out like a charge of escaping electricity. "Fun's over, boys! Texas puts you under arrest!"

A sneer bared the yellow fangs of Bucktooth. His shoulders slid into an ominous hunch. "Not more'n a thimbleful uh hell, yuh are...but tellin' it scary! How would you like yore lead? Afore yuh drink...or after?"

Bat's eyes flicked about the saloon and a tight grin bit into his cheeks.

"Why, I don't mind a drink with you, boys," he murmured and strode to the bar. "Monogram!" Then to Bucktooth: "I've drunk with men uh yore stripe, gallows an' Boothill bound! It's all in a day's work. Better have one, boys; where you're goin' is one hell of a dry place! There's fancy labels on bottles, but they ain't got bottoms. There's girls there, but yuh can't climb the high fence. The water's hot an' the air hotter. The devil chuckles at yuh. Have yore last do, fellas!"

"Hell must be a hell of a place!" husked Powley thickly.

Bucktooth indulged in something that passed for a grin. "I dunno," he mumbled. "A fella wouldn't have tuh worry about winter or singin' psalms. We'll drink one, Pard. Then...fix this ranger man with a one-way ticket!"

Three glasses were poured. Bat's right hand clung to the lapel of his coat as he bent his elbow. Both Bucktooth and Powley's right hands dangled near their gun heels. The tension picked up.

As the fiery liquor bit into Bat's throat, he looked down his glass. The killer's gimlet eyes were burning with hate, and in them Odett read the desire to terminate the play quickly. They mirrored his thoughts plainly as print.

Like the dive of a bull-bat in feeding flight, Bat's hand went under his coat, came out gun-filled. He fired and swung his body, flinging his half-filled whisky glass into Pard Powley's leering face. The shock of his shot sheered the tension and rolled the echoes.

Bucktooth's gun triggered impotently into the floor as death convulsed his muscles. And before his lank body stretched out, Bat was clubbing the wrist of Pard, knocking his gun clatteringly to the floor. Powley's screams tore the air as he clawed at his eyes, trying to dash the burning whisky from them. With cool deftness, Bat snapped on his "come-alongs," clamping one bracelet to Pard, the other to his own wrist.

ACRID gunsmoke filled the room. The lawman swung his guns on a half-dozen nondescript patrons, friends or acquaintances of the two killers. But they were too awed by this explosive little ranger to lift a finger. Slowly he backed out, pulling Powley with him. At the door he paused, cracked out:

"Leave the carcass lay!" he ordered them tersely. "The undertaker will be in to make out a report. Just take this as a message from Captain Amster...when any uh you feel like cuttin' notches in yore guns...do it outa our jurisdiction or.. ."

He dragged Powley into the street. The killer cursed expertly, luridly. The breathless townsmen fluttered to them like moths to a light. Mayor Lassiter and three stalwarts were the first to the ranger's side. Bat unpinned his badge, put it away.

"By Gawd, yuh did it!" thundered the mayor incredulously.

Bat seemed to shrink in stature and his round face lost some of its grimness. A boyish smile broke his lips. "It was simple," he murmured.

"Only one chore remains. Have the coroner's jury sit on Bucktooth an' bring out a verdict it was death in the name uh the law. He saw fit tuh buck Texas an' Captain Amster's orders."

"Three cheers for Cap Amster!" whooped someone. Presidio shook with delirium for the famous ranger captain. And Bat Odett joined in... same as always.

"Send the coroner's report tuh the captain," he told the mayor. "I'll be goin' now. I could stand a cup uh java afore the train comes."

"I'll send that report pronto," boomed the official, "along with a citation to the governor! Amster shore gets things done along this uncurried strip uh hell!"

"He shore does," Bat gave back.

Then he was pulling his prisoner down the street, the killer following sullenly, but meekly. Bat's parade was the center of admiring interest among the grimy youngsters skipping alongside. Piping voices, awed by the magnificence of it all, came to his ears. He smiled at the young talk, thought of little Bob.

"Bravest man in Texas, I betcha," piped a freckle-faced admirer.

"Shot Bucktooth right atween the horns, he did," said another.

"Him an' my gun-slingin' Pop ud make a match," said Freckles proudly.

Then Bat was towing Powley into a chop house near the station. He drank coffee, thought of Sarah and what she'd say about this job, until the long "hallooooo!" of the train whistle moved him.

2

COMFORTABLY seated in the coach, unconscious of the staring eyes about him, Bat freed his wrist, chained Powley to the seat-arm. Moodily, he settled back to enjoy a quiet smoke. As the land rolled billowingly past his window and the rhythmic clack of the wheels over rail-joints lulled him, he toyed with the thoughts of a ranger captaincy.

Captain Jim Amster had never recommended him for the position, had jealously kept him at his side, always leaning upon him in times like this. Yet, Bat could find no space in his heart for condemnation of Amster's actions. They had been friends through life, had never been separated for long, except once when he, Bat, had followed the dictates of foot-itch for a period of years. Amster had never talked of what he did during that time. Bat often wondered what he had done, but he was too tactful to inquire. Men in this country didn't do that sort of thing.

At the end of five years, Bat had returned to Tres Nogales, with his bride, to find a more stern, taciturn Jim Amster. Now Jim was a bleak-eyed, morose captain of the rangers. Bat went to work for him then...ten years ago. The job paid well. Now he owned a small spread on the edge of the town. Bob, tousle-headed youngster, made life brighter. And when Bat slid down the wintry slide of life, young Bob would rod the little layout and he, Bat, would stitch saddles in the sun.

He was prodded from his reverie by a finger. Agitated, he squirmed in his seat, looked up. The clean bronze face of a youngster stared down at him. His eyes were blue, his chin cast ruggedly, and his semi-full lips smiled easily, revealing even white teeth. The ranger's eyes shuttled over the youngster. Broad-shouldered, trim-waisted in plaid shirt and levis. Then Bat's eyes were fastening on the badge pinned to the shirt pocket, a Texas Ranger emblem, golden eagle on a field of blue—untarnished by use.

"Bat Odett?" inquired the youngster.

"That's me, companero," the lawdog answered. "An'...?"

"Steve Amster!" There was a hint of pride and excitement in the youngster's voice. "Son uh Captain Jim Amster, reporting to Tres Nogales for duty!"

Bat's eyelids fluttered to hide his surprise. He voiced his thoughts aloud. "Jim never told me about a son."

A hurt look drove color from the

recruit's face, and a cloud crossed his eyes. He hung his head. "I guess he ain't braggin' none," he mumbled. "Dad never thought much of anything but the rangers, least of all me." The color was racing back in his face, and his voice took on that note of excitement. "But I'll win 'im over. I got in the outfit down in Laredo. Had myself transferred up here!"

Bat turned his eyes away so the captain's son would not see the expression there. "Does he know it?" he murmured, and riveted his gaze on Powley, who affected drowsiness. There was something lurking behind the killer's slitted eyes. Though he lounged, his body was taut. Lightning quick, Bat reasoned it out and he smothered the grin on his lips. Any minute now two men would learn a lesson.

The youngster's voice sheered through Bat's rigidness. "No, I haven't sent word. Keepin' it as sort of a surprise."

Then it happened. Powley leaped for the gun swinging on the youngster's leg. Bat's hand shot inside his coat, came out and raised high. He brought the gun barrel down smartly on Powley's head. A sickening crunch, gasp, and the killer stretched his length along the seat.

"Never swing a gun close to a hombre like that," warned Bat. "You might as well learn now...or you ain't gonna be of no use to the rangers."

Steve Amster's face was paled. He nodded darkly. "Yeah," he rumbled, "an' thanks!"

"Sit down, kid," ordered Bat affably, pulling out and offering a cigaret. When they were smoking, puffs spiraling the air, Bat said: "Surprise, eh? Yeah, it shore will be."

"I haven't seen dad for seven years," said the youngster. "That was when he came home to bury mother. She died of the flu. Dad was so wrapped up in his work. He kept us well, sent us money all the time. Now, I can make out for myself. I'm sixteen an' ready to go!"

Bat appraised him, nodded sagely. Youngsters become men in this ruthless country quickly, through necessity to survive. Bat remembered himself at that age. Punching cows, branding and roundup, doing a man's work. This clean, straight-limbed youngster was no younger than some of the famous men carrying the torch of Texas law to badmen. Captain Leander McNelly had been but a few years older when he took the fight to the Red Butcher of Matamoros. The Rio Grande country bred men, quickly and strong.

Bat said, inoffensively: "Better put that badge in yore pocket, son. When it's showin' like that, an' you ain't on the trail uh skunks, people ask yuh too many questions: How many men yuh killed? Can yuh eat all the cactus in the desert? Tuh demonstrate yore gunswift. It's hell. Best they don't know yo're a lawman."

Steve flushed, unpinned his badge, and thrust it into his pocket. Bat sighed. Good thing he hadn't faced Jim Amster with that on his shirt. The captain was the only man in Tres Nogales who exploited his badge of office.

As the sun dipped into Chihuahua's horizon, the train scuttled into Tres Nogales. Pard Powley followed like a lamb when Bat led him from the train. He continually brushed his hand across his forehead to ease the ache caused by the lawman's descending gun barrel.

Few were on the street when Powley was put in the little jail to await trial. The succulent odors of cooking permeated the cooling air and ravaged Bat. Night was coming on. "C'mon!" he said to Steve. "You might as well meet your father while I make out my report."

Together, they strode up the street. The little adobe office at the far end of the thoroughfare was their goal. A restlessness stirred within Bat, caused by Steve Amster's presence. How would gruff Captain Amster receive his son? Bat had a fair idea; he decided he would rather be searching out some more killers intrenched in saloons than to be present.

THEY SWUNG into the office. Captain Amster's head was buried in his work. Bat and Steve arranged themselves in front of the desk at attention. The ranger captain did not look up, continued writing. His seamed countenance was ruddy red in the guttering lamp light. His body was soft from easy living; his broadcloth suit immaculate. A gold shield, the Lone Star state's token of appreciation of his services, threw back the light. It was pinned on the lapel of his coat.

"Didn't expect you back so soon, Odett," Amster rumbled, without looking up. "How'd you make out?"

Bat became aware of Steve's quick breathing. The youngster's hands were on the desk now and he was staring at his father. Bat answered: "Forced to kill one. The other's in jail pending your pleasure. Presidio sends their thanks."

"Good!" barked the captain, then as if the magnet in his son's eyes drew his face up, he straightened. Coldly, his eyes roamed over Steve, swept him from head to belt. There was no hint of recognition, no paternal lights, no gladness in his austere eyes.

Impulsively, Steve fished in his pocket, drew forth his badge, extended it. "See!" he cried, pride in his voice. "I've made it, Dad!"

The cloud that darkened the elder Amster's brow sent a chill up Bat's back. Rigid, the captain rose. His voice was flat, unexpressive as he spoke.

"Subordinates, sir, call me Captain Amster. You are fully aware, no doubt, of the regulations of the Texas Rangers. You will be treated as a recruit here, with no special privileges. Odett, show Ranger Steve Amster where he'll bunk. That's all ...until I need you!"

Clammy, unseen fingers gripped Bat's throat, choked off the words he might have uttered. Steve's face was drained of color and his lips trembled. The captain resumed his seat, buried his head in his work. The youngster turned wondering, hurt eyes to Bat.

Odett made a motion toward the door with his head. They matched strides outside. The star-spangled night had blazoned forth and a cool breeze wafted from the Rio Grande.

"Gawd!" gasped Steve.

The forlornness of his voice stabbed Bat. He cuffed the kid on the shoulder. "Don't judge too harshly, son," he murmured softly. "Yore father holds a responsible position here. He must keep a firm grip on things. The weakest link in the chain might put the skids under him. Give him a chance!"

A sentence tore from Steve's soul. "The courageous captain of the Big Bend. My father. Why...why...he doesn't even know me."

Bat knew that mere words would not placate the youngster. "C'mon up to the house," he ordered. "Sarah'll have the nose bags ready."

Silently, they walked to the little, white frame structure on the outskirts of Tres Nogales. A picket fence gleamed under the stars. The rambling, vine-covered home sent a thrill through Bat. His barrel chest swelled and his pale eyes took on a gleam. He quickened his step. And as he swung the gate open, a long warwhoop tore from his lips.

The door shot open and a bundle of smiling gingham flew down the steps. Bat opened his arms, caught Sarah and kissed her full on the lips. Then she was thrusting him at arm's length, her coquettish eyes concerned. "All right?" she queried throatily.

"Fit as a tuned fiddle, honey!" he gave back. "Sarah, this's Steve Amster, Jim's boy. Come tuh ride the Rio with the Rangers!"

With a laugh in her eyes, her golden-haired head bobbing acknowledgment of the meeting, she swept their arms in hers. "Come in," she cried. "Things are steaming hot."

There was a thrill in her touch to Bat, her every manner. Yet, tonight his home-coming was dampened by what had happened at the ranger office. Little Bob had already been put to bed, so they ate in silence. Steve's face was stern now, gone was the boyish anticipation with which

his countenance had glowed. His eyes were clouded and stamped with hurt. Sarah sensed something wrong and withheld her gay chatter.

When the meal was finished, Steve rose. "If you'll just tell me," he murmured flatly, "where I stay...?"

"I'll show you!" Bat jumped to his feet, pulled on his hat. Together, they headed back uptown.

On the way, Steve said: "I've never known a home like you got."

The utter depression in his voice, the hurt tone, made Bat's eyes misty. Words of consolation choked in his throat. There was just nothing to say. He showed Steve his quarters and moved moodily back up the street. Sarah was awaiting him in the darkness of the porch. Her voice called him to her side. She cupped his hand in hers, "Tell me?" she murmured.

EXHIBITING more passion and bitterness than he ever had, Bat poured out the story of the capture, meeting of Steve, and the captain's reactions. Finished with: "It ain't like Jim. He looked at that kid without blinkin' an eye."

Sarah's voice was withering: "It's just like him! The famous Jim Amster! Indeed! The glory bloated hypocrite! He sits in his office and sends you on jobs like today's. You risk your life; he gets the cheers and citations and promotions. Your reward will some day be a gunshot grave. Oh, Bat! Either give it up... or assert your rights!"

"Jim Amster's my superior," rumbled Bat, momentarily angry. "He can't help it if the populace sees fit to cover his actions with glory."

"Actions!" stormed Sarah, with righteous indignation, her fingers digging into her husband's hand. "If Jim Amster saw action—such as you've seen today—his gun would fall from his fingers, he'd be so palsied with fear. You've built his reputation for him, Bat. It was you, singlehanded, who rounded up the Flame's Bunch. Who was it brought back One-Eyed Garcia, when all others failed? You! An' numerous others! Jim Amster! He smiles and nods and takes the medals. Your glory has gone the way of the gunsmoke you made...fading out of sight! Bat...!"

His weary rising halted her passionate tirade. He mumbled: "It all narrows down to one thing... I'm a ranger! Duty comes first!"

"You're a fool!" she charged.

That hurt Bat; he disengaged his hand from hers and stalked into the house. And as he undressed for bed, Sarah had not yet come in. He could hear her dry sobs from the porch. A pang touched him. He wanted to fold his arms about her, quiet her fears. But wisely, he crawled between the covers. Tears are the woman's way to relieve pent-up emotions. She would come to him, dry-eyed and tender. But she didn't!

Bat rolled and tossed, waiting. Then he dozed. He awoke with a start, his hand stealing across the covers. Sarah was not there! With a cry, he leaped from the bed, pulled on his trousers. A death-like coldness gripped him. The house was silent.

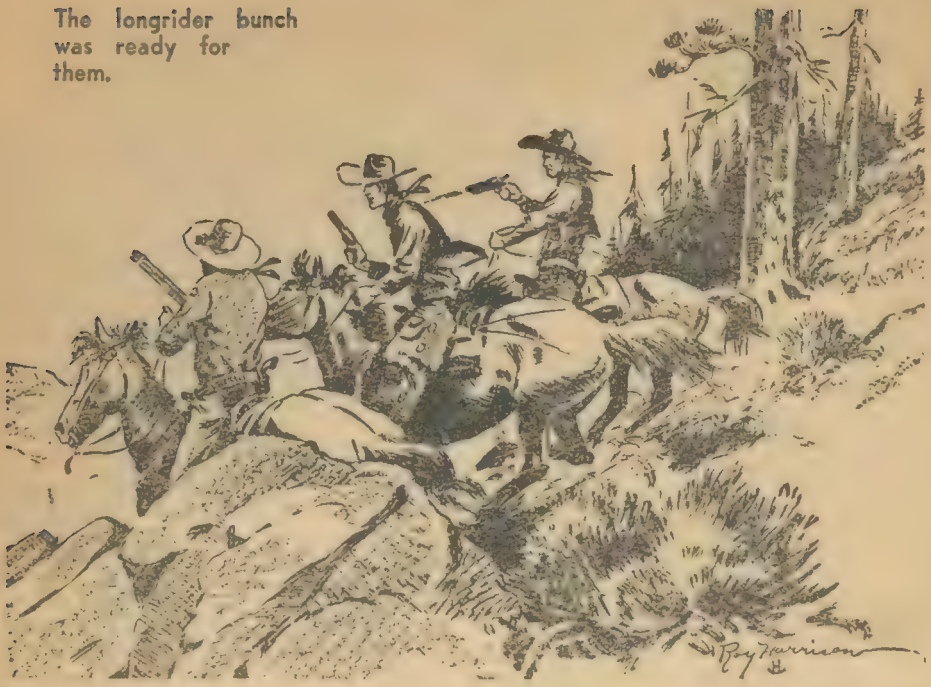
Blindly, he stumbled into the front room calling her name. No answer. The hammering wall clock mocked him. Shakily, he struck a match, put it to the lamp. A folded note attracted him. With frenzied hands, he opened it. Tears had splashed amid the light scrawl. The letters quivered and leaped at him:—

Bat:

It's no use. I've tried to kid myself that some day you'd get the gumption to make something of yourself. Ten years now...and still in the same old rut. Bob and I have gone to the folks at Marfa. Don't follow. It will do no good. But...you'd go a million miles through hell for your superior, but not one foot to advance yourself...and us.

Sarah.

Dazedly, he grabbed at the table for support. He was alone. It frightened him. He murmured: "Sarah, honey!"



The longrider bunch was ready for them.

3

SLOWLY, dazedly, Bat dressed. The emptiness of the house was like a pressure against him. His head kept swinging about the room, eyes fastening wistfully on the small articles cherished by Sarah, little things he had purchased for her. The homey little structure seemed like an overly spacious mansion of marble halls of which he was the only occupant. He shuddered.

Tugging on his hat with a vicious pull, he quit the house. He stalked to the edge of the Rio Grande, sat down on the bank, stared at the turgid expanse. The river stretched away like a twisted blade of silver, made so by the irradiant, tawny moon. He found solace in its protesting murmurs. Hot, feverish sensations flooded across his brow. Seething thoughts jumbled through his mind. He felt utterly and bitterly lost. Like a man who suddenly finds himself paralyzed after years of activity.

And out of his bitterness welled one resolve. He was through as a ranger!

There was not that in Bat Odett's makeup which would allow him to exploit and brag of the things he did. Struggle as he might, it sickened him when he thought of exposing the fraudulent fame of Captain Jim Amster. Jim was gifted with the virtue of leadership—one of those men who in war times are generals whose infantry storms the hill and brings lasting fame as a war lord to the officer who stayed behind. So be it! But Odett was of the infantry—a ranger. Upon his bulldog courage captains were made. But service or no, Jim Amster or not—he was through. The morning sun would see his badge on Amster's desk. Then he would go to Sarah and little Bob. Greater love hath no man....

Shaking his shoulders as if he had just emerged from the river, Bat rose and went back uptown. Conviviality was at its peak and he felt the need of companionship. He turned into the Wet Your Neck Saloon. Angled across the sawdust-littered floor to where young Steve

Amster sat at a table, his brows knit, eyes sombre, a bottle in front of him.

Bat took a chair, poured himself a drink without asking. Steve regarded him quizzically. He said: "You've lost your best friend. ...I can see it in your eyes. You'd make a hell of a poker player, Odett—like me."

The lawdog nodded grimly. "Sarah's gone!"

A dark shadow passed over the youngster's face. "Why?"

But Bat was not a man given to explanations. His counsel was wrapped tightly within him and there was no utterance or outlet. It bubbled in his throat, but he choked it back. He would not burden others with his problems.

But there was no denying the captain's son. "I know!" he clipped bitterly. "I saw enough today to know. She left you because of my father. Everything he's ever touched has turned to ashes. He broke my mother's heart—just as he's broken you. Odett, I came up here expecting to find a gracious, philosophical man. One whom I could look up to, pattern myself after. I naturally supposed his fame was built on courage and knowledge. Yeah! What have I found? You're the power behind the throne. Without you...my father might be swamping in this saloon. I..."

"That's not true!" interrupted Bat stoutly.

Steve waved him aside. "The hell it ain't! He received the kind of glory that gains him affluence in this world. Your glory's in gunsmoke, the cloud upon which my father rides. It's a flimsy throne, Odett, an' one easily torn down. Today, he wouldn't acknowledge his own son." His voice took on bitterness. "It's ironical, that the reward should go to the undeserving."

"We're rangers," grunted Bat defensively. "We owe...!"

He broke off sharp, his voice catching in his throat. The swing-doors had batted open and a gun-shot cadaver stood swaying on the threshold. Blood streaked the sides of his dust-caked face. His hair was disheveled, his eyes writhing with fear. His grimy talons clawed the air and he fell forward, crying as he hit the floor: "Fer Gawd's sake somebody gimme a drink!"

Bat swept the bottle from the table and was first to the wounded man's side. Tenderly, he tilted the man's head, allowed a trickle of the fiery liquor to pass his lips. Patrons packed close, white of face, staring. Weakly, the man fought to his elbows. Looked about him with glazed eyes.

"Wiped out!" he gasped in a flat voice. "The hull uh Toro Springs country's gone up in gunsmoke. Bravo Krautch an' Fang Farley leadin' a passel uh Yaquis. Hell! That's what it was. Wife an' kids crucified ...lucky tuh carry word..." His voice tailed off. Crimson gushed to his lips and he was dead.

Grim-lipped, Bat straightened, his sombre eyes boring Steve's. The youngster's face was pale, and stark horror was mirrored there.

"Murderers!" ground out Bat. "Bravo Krautch an' Fang Farley. New Mexico hellions that must uh come across Chihuahua to the Rio. Damn their rotten...!"

Unbridled fury choked his utterance. The doors slammed and the bull-like bellow of Captain Jim Amster sheered the awed silence. "What the hell's goin' on here? Just got word...!"

His voice cracked as the gathering parted and the corpse lay before him. The edges of his lips turned white and his nose grew thinner with the pursuing of his mouth.

"Good Gawd!" he muttered.

"Freighted with enough lead tuh sink in hard pan!" swore someone.

BUT BAT wasn't listening; his eyes were on Jim Amster. Face to face with death, the famous ranger was fighting with masterful effort to keep from trembling. To the camera-eye of Odett, whose orbs catalogued all men's characteristics and read them like a book, Amster's actions showed him just how far Jim had slipped in his life of ease behind a desk. Yet, the man's ego carried off the scene.

(*Turn To Page* 122)

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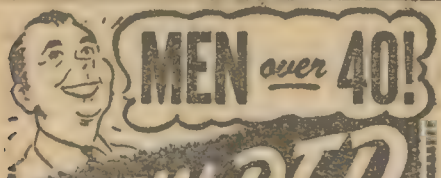

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"Get the coroner, you!" he ordered tersely of a patron. "You two come with me!" he motioned to Bat and his son.

The three stalked from the saloon. As they walked toward the ranger office, Bat's hand stole into his pocket and his badge began twisting in his fingers. A grim satisfaction crept over him. Now was the time to resign! There were only three rangers in Tres Nogales, including the captain. The rest were on patrol along the Rio. Amster would have to take over this chore himself; it would bring out his true colors. A savage grin twisted Bat's features. In this moment he was a different man, calculating, cunning, vengeful. They swung into the office.

The captain flopped into the chair behind his desk, mopped sweat from his brow, a nervous moisture, for the weather was cool. "What did he say before he died? Tell me," he said.

Tersely, Bat repeated the words. The ranger official banged his fist on the desk, and a smile broke his lips. "Good!" he cried. "There's only one way for them to get back across the line and that's at Norte Crossing. Bat, take Steve and get down there. Don't let Krautch or Farley cross the Rio alive! I'll show 'em Texas don't cater to their murderous ways. An' this'll make the peacocks uh Austin sit up an' take notice!"

Bat's eyes hardened, his lips drew fine and he leaned forward, braced by widespread hands ont he desk-top. "You'd send your own son into a den of rattlesnakes like that?" The softness in his voice was wicked.

A startled expression dyed Amster's features. He paled. Bat Odett had never spoken to him like this before. He surged to his feet, both fists beating the desk-top. "Damnation," he thundered, his face coloring. "This man's a ranger, isn't he? Then...he'll do his job like the rest. I show no favors...nor grant none!"

Bat's voice stayed soft. "Yo're sending us into something you'd be afraid to face yourself!"

Crimson flushed to the roots of Amster's hair. "Why...why...!" he

sputtered angrily, "you're insubordinate, sir! I'll have you put in jail pending courtmartial!"

"Jail be damned!" exploded Bat, eyes shooting flames. "An' the same tuh courtmartial! Jim, you've blackslided a long way, but I never suspected it was far enough that you'd thrust an inexperienced kid, yore own flesh and blood, too, into a mess like this. To hell with regulations, discipline an' the code of the rangers! I resign!" He spun his badge on the table. It clattered with metallic sharpness as hush filled the room and boiled over.

Then he was talking on, passionately: "Jim, you ain't man enough to walk out that door and ride toward Norte Crossing. Your strength has always come from what I did. Yo're living off the foods of the past an' it's made you fat an' soft. My wife always told me that, but I couldn't see it until she left me tonight. It was over you and the way you've kept me pounded down. Now you would kill your own son to gain more laurels. Well...I won't be part nor parcel to it!"

The captain slumped back into his chair. His lids were half closed, face white, lips bloodless. Bat was conscious of Steve's quick breathing, conscious of the pressure the youngster was exerting to buoy up his dejected and broken father.

Slowly, Jim Amster looked up, fastened his lackluster eyes on his son. A smile broke Steve's lips. Wistfully, his father's mouth answered. Then he was coming from his chair again, rasping his palms together. A pang touched Bat. His former superior looked like a man about to sacrifice himself to a pillar of fire.

Without a word, Amster turned to the peg on the wall. He took down his guns and strapped them about his waist. His hand shook as he reached up and unpinned the badge of the lapel of his coat and thrust it into his pocket. His jaw shot out, and his eyes were belligerent as he glared at Bat.

"Crawl, damn yuh!" he hissed savagely. "Me an' my boy ride the Rio!"

(*Turn Page*)

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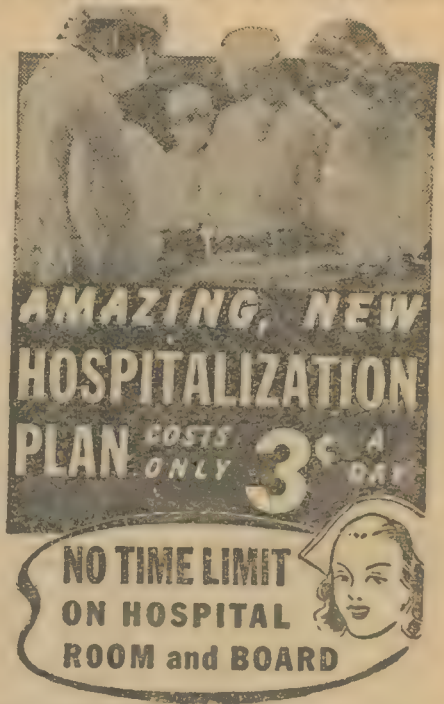

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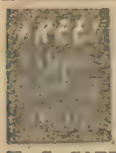

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Stiffly, he strode from the room. Steve cuffed his shoulder as he passed and fell in behind him. Father and son...rangers...were riding the Rio Grande for Texas.

All the heated passion and fever drained from Bat. For a moment, he hesitated. Gone was his bitterness. And for now...thoughts of Sarah did not permeate his mind. He had just witnessed the most dramatic transition in character he had ever seen. With a quick stab of his hand, he picked up his badge, thrust it in his pocket and raced from the room.

The first grey streaks of dawn were dying the east when he swung into the leather. Hanging low over the withers, he raced toward the south, caught the two bobbing silhouettes in the dawn. He drew abreast of them, nodded curtly.

"Short cut!" he clipped tersely, and tumbled down the slope to the right.

Amster and his boy fell in behind, content he should lead the way. Grimly confident now of victory over the danger ahead, Captain Jim Amster's right bower was showing the way. The best manhunter and fighter in the whole Big Bend.

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UNMERCIFULLY, the sun beat down. The erosive land shimmered under its glare. Fleecy clouds floated over the distant Chihuahua Mountains like frayed bales of cotton. Numerous lakes dotted the desert. Mirages!

Bat kept well into the bosque of the mighty Rio. The river's course cut lazy dollops toward the gulf, its water like a curving trace of quicksilver under the glare of the sun. Dust rose to cloak them and the riders pulled their neckerchiefs over their mouths.

Sweat poured from every pore of Captain Jim Amster. His haggard face was streaked with it, caked with dust. It added to the sombreness, he reflected. His chin jutted with determination, his lips drawn thin, his eyes grim. He was the

man now Bat Odett had known in his younger years.

Steve Amster's lips were turned up at the corners. A strange light was in his eyes. Despite the doggedness in his face for what lay ahead, one might have accused him of taking his chore lightly. His shoulders were square, his head high.

Sagely, Bat read what was taking place within the youngster. Steve had found his father...at last. No longer was he an orphan battering against the rigidness of an unrelenting sire. Never again would he curse the name of Amster. He was proud now. It showed in his carriage, his expression. Blood had proved thicker than water.

And now as the molten disk above began its descent toward the Chihuahuas, heat floating like clouds above the land, Bat speeded the pace. Wise in the ways and cunnings of outlawry, he surmised Bravo and Fang would hide by day and cross the Rio at night. The moon was their sun, the dark their light, the owlhoot their language, murder and rapine their pastime. He knew there would be no mercy asked nor quarter given. This was just another of those many chores of the border rangers that would be written into Texas annals in gunsmoke. It never occurred to Bat to estimate the force against him. Counting odds before the battle was over proved fatal to many men.

A half mile from Norte Crossing, Bat reined down. The sun was poised at the rim of yonder mountains, ready to plunge from sight. Jim and his son lit down, hunkered there.

Bat traced patterns in the dust with a stick. "There's only one way tuh do it," he said, "an' that's for two of us to cross to the Mexican side and find places we can shift from one to another and make ourselves look like an armed force. The third member has to carry the fire to them. When they get in midstream, he has to charge down the bank throwin' lead to make 'em mill. That way the two on the other side can pick their targets. They deserve no mercy nor advantage."

(*Turn Page*)

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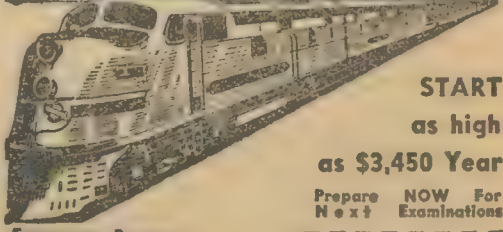

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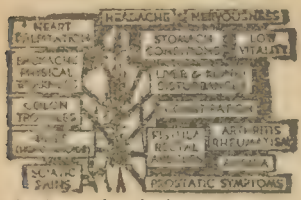

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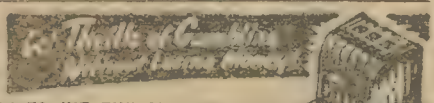

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WESTERN ACTION

Steve nodded grimly. Jim Amster's hand shook, and a trace of fear came into his eyes. Bat regarded him sharply. Then he knew! His searing tirade in the office had driven the ranger captain this far, but now... face to face with the danger, he was going into a funk.

"Take it easy," he soothed.

Jim's eyes snapped into focus and a flush crept to the roots of his hair. Determination again gained supremacy. Grimly, Bat nodded, said: "Being the postion on this bank, the one uh openin' the play is the most dangerous, for they'll all open up on the one who starts it, we'll draw sticks. The one who gets the long one starts the ball."

He broke the twig into measured pieces. Two short, one long. He put them behind him, shuffled them about. Then his clenched fist came out, the tips just visible. "Draw yore grave marker," he said.

Without looking, Steve reached out, fumbled along Bat's hand, contacted a twig, palmed it as he pulled. He never glanced at its length, just hunkered there gazing into the swirling waters of the Rio.

Jim Amster stared at the two left. He licked his lips, grey now in the fading light. His hand strayed out gingerly, then drew back. He wet his mouth again, looked at Bat. Something in Odett's eyes drew the captain's hand to the twigs. Still he couldn't decide. Patiently, Bat waited, hunkered there like a squat Buddha, expressionless, enigmatic.

Then Jim was drawing one, slowly. He stopped breathing as he pulled. And as the twig came from Bat's hand his eyes bugged, grew round and wide. He gasped as if he had

pulled the stopper from the bottle of Doom. He drew the long one.

Steve never even looked around, just tossed his twig into the river, stared at it as it whirled away. With a grunt, Bat began picking his teeth with his. "That's it!" he murmured. "Cap, you open the play!"

The pallor of Amster's face deepened. Then night fell with the suddenness typical of the country to cloak his emotions. Bat rose.

"It's you an' me for the river, kid," he muttered to Steve.

The youngster rose, strode to his father's side. He cuffed his sire on the shoulder. "See yuh after they're scattered from hell to breakfast!"

Amster mumbled a reply so softly as to be almost inaudible. "Good luck!" said Bat. "An' we'll be waitin' for your signal!"

Then he was climbing into his saddle, reining toward the water. As he paused on the bank to unstrap his guns and cinch them around the horn, he looked back at Amster. The captain had not moved, just hunkered there, a dejected blob of a shadow. Bat's heart bled for the man. But this was pay-off. Amster would have to fight this battle with himself alone.

BAT AND STEVE plunged into the whispering water. Cautiously, the horses felt their way. A half mile downstream was the crossing. Here it would be deep. And when the foam began curling about the chests of their horses, they slipped from their saddles, holding to their mounts' tails. Courageously, the ponies fought their way across. Emerging on the far bank, Bat and Steve poured the water from their boots, wrung out their trousers best they could. Then they were strapping their guns on their hips, looking to the loads.

Mounted, they pushed cautiously down the bank, taking care to keep well within the shelter of the fronds, the hoofs of their horses in the ooze to mute the clop.

The sky was one welter of glittering stars. "Moon won't come until late tonight," rumbled Bat, "but

(*Turn Page*)

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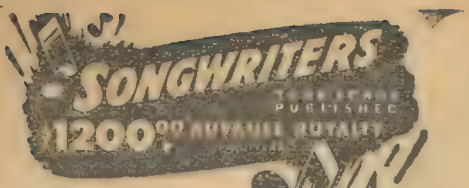

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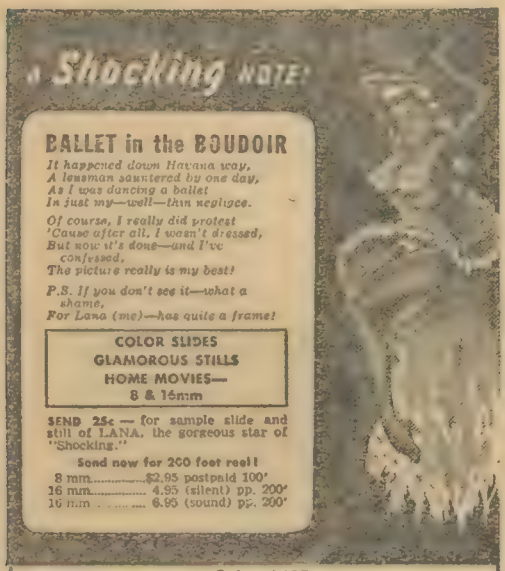

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them lanterns up there are enough to etch a man for targetin'."

"I'm worried about dad," muttered Steve.

Bat hunched his shoulders. "He's over there fightin' one uh life's toughest problems, son. An' two'll take yore one...he comes through with colors flyin'."

"Just so it ain't the yellow flag," countered Steve morosely.

BAT CHOSE strategic points, mixed emotions surging through him. Steve Amster had no faith in his father. And from what Bat had read in his superior, he wasn't sure his two-to one bet was logical. He had only said it to buoy the youngster. But Steve was sharp. Bat sighed. If Jim Amster didn't go through with his play....

Twenty feet separated him from Steve. His rifle lay in front of him on a flat rock, his two sixguns flanking it, ready for instant use. He tried thinking of Sarah, his boy, but it was no go. The situation at hand packed too much punch to allow his mind to dwell on anything else. Although he did make one vow...if he lived through this, he would ride straight to Marfa.

He had been sweeping the far bank with his eyes. The bank was shifting, its serrated edge bouncing north. It was Bravo Krautch and Fang Farley and the Yaqui hellions. Bat's throat constricted and a low warning sound knifed the night. Instantly, Steve answered. Bat grinned grimly. He could count on the youngster.

Bat's frame seemed to swell in size. He was a ranger now on the hunt. Gunsmoke in the offing, swift justice to be meted out. He wondered what Sarah would think if she knew Captain Jim Amster hovered on the opposite bank, with his the most dangerous chore. He bet it would curdle her scornfulness, take the bitterness from her voice. Then all thoughts fled. The renegades were easing into the crossing, minous hulks in the darkness, closely packed. If Bat knew the ways of whites who led such raiders, Bravo Krautch and Fang Farley would be

in their midst, with bodies between them and bullets. He laid his cheek along the stock of his rifle.

THE CAVALCADE advanced through the shallow crossing slowly. Now they were in the middle of the stream. Time for Captain Amster to strike. Tensely, Bat squinted the barrel, trigger finger itching. But the one-man eruption planned for the other bank did not happen. Bat's blood froze. The renegades were almost across.

Savagely, he tightened his grip on the gun. Amster had failed him and his son.

Now a renegade voice rose. "Amster...hah! He didn't have the guts to come. I tol' yuh so!"

"Yellow as they make 'em," cracked out another. "Funny, he didn't send that sawed-off what does all his dirty work we've heard about. My iron's honin' fer meat."

Savage hatred for what these men stood for flamed in Bat.

"Amster did send 'em!" he screamed. "Root hawg or die!"

The banks of the Rio caught the gun-sounds and rolled them into nothingness. Pencils of purple streaked the night. Horses squealed, clawed at the stars. Screaming riders fought their spooked mounts, trying to trigger this methodically firing ranger whose lone courage broke their morale.

Target after target leaped before Bat. He fired, swept his gun on another when that renegade fell as if knocked by some unseen hand. The gun grew hot in his hands. When the last shell was spent, he threw it at a rider who flashed close on pitching horse, grabbed up his short guns.

In the short breathing spell, he could hear and see the flashes of Steve's weapons. The youngster was doin' his share, like a man.

Bat was unmindful of the whisperings of death about him. An angry leaden hornet smashed him cruelly in the knee. He triggered from that position. He made out the wolfish face of Fang Farley bearing

(*Turn Page*)

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down upon him. Both his guns roared and the renegade was blasted from his saddle.

The murderous Yaquis surged to the attack. Never a chance in hell to win! His shoulder went numb, the left gun dribbling from his fingers. He cut down two more.

He heard Krautch shout: "The Kid's down; git the sawed-off!" And the full attack swayed at him.

Bat murmured: "This's it!" and poured lead into the charge.

Then a new note was injected in the battle. From the bosque of the Rio Grande swept a rider, his voice shrieking like a Comanche on the kill. Bat's heart beat wildly. Captain Jim Amster was going to war!

With twin guns spitting flame, the very viciousness of Amster's attack turned the tide. With a wild death cry, Bravo Krautch threw up his hand. Their leaders gone, the Yaquis broke for the brush, scurrying to safety under the cover of darkness.

Bat lurched to his feet, limped to where Steve Amster huddled, all blood and dust. He felt of the youngster's heart. It beat strongly!

Bat felt a little sick and horribly weak. His only conscious emotion was that Jim Amster had found himself before it was too late.

FOLLOWING days were hazy to Bat. Cooling hands caressed his fevered brow, a tiny voice kept saying "Daddy!" at intervals. And when finally the sickness left him, he looked into the tear-brimmed eyes of Sarah; the ruddy, scrubbed face of little Bob.

"I was a fool, Bat," she said condemningly.

His hand crept to hers. "You were right," he answered.

Then came the day when Captain Jim Amster came swinging through the gate. Gone was his paunch. His face was lean as a cougar's, his eyes sparklingly clear. He glowed with the rigors of the saddle.

"How yuh feelin', Bat, ol' son?" he boomed. "Figger you can face the Colonel from Austin? He's here with some citations! He'll wanna hear yore story."

Sarah came through the door, stood at Bat's side. For a moment their eyes met and held. Bat said softly: "Yes...I'm ready to give my report."

Supported by Jim's arm, they trudged down street, Sarah swishing along beside them in full gingham skirt. In front of the ranger office, the Tres Nogales contingent stood at attention, Steve Amster at the far end, still on rude crutches. They pulled up in front of Colonel Nix, famed border patrolman. He smiled his greeting.

"I've strict orders not to keep you too long on yore feet," he said kindly to Bat. "If you'll report officially...?"

Holding himself as rigid as he could, Bat waxed eloquent on how the charge of Captain Jim Amster saved the day. He finished with: "...An' I'm more proud than ever to be a member of Captain Amster's post!"

He heard the tight gasp of his wife, knew he had done it again. Built Amster to the sky.

Fumblingly, the old lawdog pinned the Lone Star State citation on Bat's breast. "...An' I regret to say," the colonel was muttering, "that you'll no longer be with Captain Amster. The service is setting up a new post at Presidio of which he'll take charge. Your Captain has seen fit to recommend you for the captaincy here. It is the wish of the rangers you agree to it. Both Texas and I and Amster are proud of you! You will take over as soon as yo're well. Captain Odett, Amster asks a request of you.... He wants his son with him at Presidio. Will you release him?"

Bat stared at Steve. The youngster was smiling, chin up. A lump came into Odett's throat. He couldn't speak. Then he was looking at Sarah. Tears of pride and happiness coursed her ivory cheeks. He put his arms about her. "Who gets the gunsmoke glory?" he chided, happiness in his heart.

●

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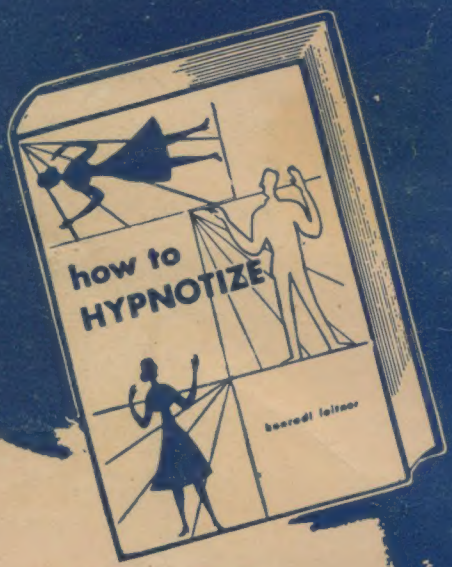

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